

Unexpected Life  
John 11:1-45  
March 26, 2023  
First Presbyterian, Luling

This is another week where the sermon title isn't going to match the sermon very well. Sorry about that. This time through, I got involved in looking at where this Lazarus story is located in John's gospel. It's right in the middle.<sup>1</sup> Half of John happens before this, and contains "signs," what we otherwise call "miracles." Things like changing water into wine and healings and, now, to top it all off, raising Lazarus. It's the biggest sign of all. After this in John, there are no more signs, but more and more frequent references to God's glory. This story is at a pivot point in both the structure and the plot of John.<sup>2</sup> I didn't notice all of that myself, but several Biblical scholars have observed all of that, and it highlights the importance not just of the content of this miraculous sign, but what it means in the larger trajectory of Jesus's ministry.

Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead is so disruptive to, well, everything, that the Temple officials actively plot how to kill both Jesus and Lazarus. Jesus has disrupted everything they thought they knew about God and life and death and power and authority, and there's only one way to stop it, and that way is the cross.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus is depicted as knowing that the cross is coming and intentionally, as Luke puts it, "setting his face toward Jerusalem." They each describe a scene in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus wrestles in such an understandable, human way, with what is expected of him and what is to come. Matthew puts it like this: "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." (26:39). Jesus makes much the same request in Mark (14:36) and Luke (22:42).

John doesn't have this prayer. There's plenty of praying as Jesus faces arrest and the cross, chapters full of prayers for the disciples, but there isn't this glimpse of Jesus's inner turmoil. I had come across this idea before, that this episode with Lazarus and the sisters is John's version of a Garden of Gethsemane moment for John, and it intrigued me in a new way this time through.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-111-45-3>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-111-45-7>

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, Karoline M. John. Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries, 2014. P. 158.

The turmoil is there in Jesus's actions, not so much in his words. He knew, John makes it clear, he knew what was to come. He and the Father are one, he knows that performing more signs will continue to draw attention from the authorities, must less performing a sign like raising someone from the dead. He knows, too, that it will lead to God's glory. He knows all that. And he loves Lazarus. He loves Mary and Martha.

The disciples in John are slightly more aware than in the other gospels, and they understand that going toward Jerusalem is not a great plan. Jesus almost got stoned, and now he's thinking of going back? Thomas knows that this trip will lead to death, eventually.

Mary and Martha send a message to Jesus that Lazarus is deathly ill, and Jesus doesn't immediately hop up and go to them, as fast as he can. He waits for two days, and then goes. You can imagine how long those two days felt to Mary and Martha, how they felt betrayed. They believed their friend could heal their brother, and he just...didn't come.

Mary and Martha, in what seems like a brave move to me, confront Jesus. Why didn't you come? You could have saved him. They weep, the people who were with them weep, and Jesus weeps too. John tells us Jesus is greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

Woven through the interactions with Mary and Martha are all of the forces pulling Jesus in all these directions. The constant drumbeat of "you could have saved him," the crowd saying "you cured the man born blind; surely you could have healed Lazarus," and Jesus's divine knowledge of what will happen if he raises Lazarus; that it will mean his own death.

There's Jesus's response to Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life," and her response, the fullest confession of faith in John: "I believe that you are the Messiah the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Jesus's divinity and power are visible all through the encounter.

And Jesus's humanity is, too. His friend has died. His other friends are deeply and openly grieving, grieving the death of their brother and the utter disappointment they feel that Jesus had not come when they needed him most. I would wager that you, too, have wept on such occasions. We've wept when our friends and family die. We've wept on behalf of our friends, too, when they grieve. We've wept when we disappoint people.

And I suspect that Jesus, being only human, was weeping for himself, for what he knew was to come, for the decision he had to make but did not want to make. The decision for God's will to be done, and not his own. In opening

Lazarus's tomb, he sealed his own death. Jesus death would bring resurrection and life, but he must pass through death first.

The decisions we have to make, the actions we have to follow through on—I don't mean to suggest they are on the same level as Jesus's decision. But I think we do know the struggle of having to do things that we don't want to do because they are the right thing to do. We know, to a lesser degree, the weight of doing things that are good in the ultimate, very long term, but that will make our lives worse in the short term.

Jesus's prayer is for us all: not my will, but thine be done.