

John 11:1-45

In one of her short stories
the writer Annie Dillard
has a scene where a family
is regrettably gathered at a grave
to commit a loved one's body to the earth.

At one point the minister proclaims
the familiar words from I Corinthians 15,
"Where, O Death, is thy sting?"

One of the family members looks up.
He scans the sorrowful faces of his family
and sees all around him
row upon row of headstones in the cemetery.
And then he thinks to himself,
"Where, O Death, is thy sting?
Why, it's just about everywhere,
seeing as you asked!"

*It's just about everywhere,
seeing as you asked.¹*

Huntley our daughter,
still gets very emotional
over our family dog's death last April.
Frankly if I think too much
about my sweet lab,
the sting of death is too much for me as well.
We have now surpassed
over 500,000 deaths of our fellow Americans
as a result of the pandemic.
Every day when I open
the Hickory Daily Record email,
there are always obituaries listed.

Where, O Death, is thy sting?
It's just about everywhere, seeing as you asked.

¹ The opening paragraph come from Scott Hoezee, <https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/lent-5a-2/?term=Lent%205A>

Most generations before us were likely
more familiar with death than we are.
How many of you know stories
from great-grandparents that involve
family members laying out the dead
in a bed or on the dining room table
for preparation?²
For the so many before us,
there were no funeral homes and hospitals
that took care of 'sanitizing' death.
Many of us have already surpassed
the life expectancy of pre-industrial people,
which was around 35.
So, Jesus' community
was well acquainted with *the sting of death*.

We get a whiff of death
right at the beginning of the story.
Our passage begins with,
"Now a certain man was ill,
Lazarus of Bethany..."
Lazarus, I want you to know,
was a shortened version
of the name Eleazer
which in Hebrew means, *God helps*.
And the name Bethany in Hebrew
means, *house of the afflicted*.³
So right away,
John is doing what biblical writers do best;
telling a story on multiple levels.
On the one level this tells perhaps an event
from the life of Jesus.

² Sandie Gravett, <https://sandiesbibleblog.wordpress.com/2015/06/25/day-172-resurrection-of-the-dead/>

³ Alyce McKenzie, <https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2011/04/lazarus-is-us-alcye-mckenzie-04-04-2011>

But on another level
it tells the Johannine community
something they would have needed
and wanted to hear;
something that we too
need and want to hear:
Lazarus from Bethany was ill
—tells us that *God helps those who are afflicted*.

At the moment it is,
Lazarus that is afflicted.
In fact, because he is ill,
Lazarus's sisters send Jesus a message,
“Lord, the one you love is ill.”
His being ill is mentioned 3 times
in the first three verses
—and so, we are meant to notice
that the illness is serious.⁴

But Jesus does a rather funny thing here.
Instead going there right away,
instead of making a plan
and wrapping up the task at hand,
getting on the way to Bethany,
Jesus says, “This illness
does not lead to death;
rather it is for God's glory,
so that the Son of God
may be glorified through it...
and Jesus stayed two days longer
in the place where he was.” (Jn. 11:4, 5b)

What an odd thing to say and do.
I know no one who
when they hear their loved one
is close to death,

⁴ Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2007 pg. 84

deliberately decides to stay where they are
and purposely not go
to be by their loved one's side.

It is jarring to read that

...unless...

unless we are meant
to really pay attention
and see the interpretative link
to what Jesus is saying.

This will not lead to death

or maybe you could say,

this will not end in death,

but...the son of God

will be glorified through it.

Already, you see,

Jesus is hinting

at the cross and resurrection.

Already, Jesus anticipates his death

—and this last sign,

this raising of Lazarus—

will propel him toward the cross,

where his hour will finally come

and the Son of God will be glorified.

Where O Death is thy sting?

It's just about everywhere,

seeing as you asked.

Because Lazarus does die.

And when Jesus is ready, (two days later)

he tells his disciples

that Lazarus has fallen asleep

and that he is going to Bethany

to wake him.

But now, the disciples wouldn't know a metaphor

if it hit them in the face,

so, Jesus has to tell them, plainly,

'Lazarus is dead.

And for your sake

I'm glad I wasn't there
so that you will come to believe.'

Here again,
we see how John,
is emphasizing that the signs
Jesus does in his life,
are done so that the world will see
who Jesus really is;
so that we may all come to believe
that Jesus is the Son of God,
that he and the father are one in the same.

Jesus has come
so that those who believe
may have life,
and have it abundantly.

Jesus has come
to awaken all of us from a spiritual slumber;
he has come so that we,
like the blind man
who received his sight (last week)
and believed in the Son of Man,
[we all] might see the Son's full glory.

When Jesus gets to Bethany
we learn that Lazarus
has been dead four days.
John makes it a point to say
that he's been dead for four days.
and that's important because
it was thought that the soul hung around,
near the grave,
for three days.⁵

So, Lazarus, who was ill,
and then died,
is now clearly dead as a door nail,
if you were asking.

⁵ Ibid. pg. 89

There is no healing now
that can help this afflicted one.
Only resurrection.

Where O Death, is thy sting?
It's just about everywhere, seeing as you asked.

Martha and Mary feel the sting acutely.
Before Jesus arrives,
Martha goes out to meet him.
I don't know
whether she's agitated with him
or frustrated and heartbroken
or all of the above.

She tells him point blank,
that if he had been there,
Lazarus would not have died.
Which even if that does hint being snarky, [What this tells us]
what it really tells us
is the depth of belief
in Jesus as **the Christ**
that Martha had come to.

She believes in Jesus enough
that she knows that had he been there,
Lazarus, her brother,
would not have died.

Mary doesn't go out to see Jesus,
she stays at home.
And when Martha and her friends tell Mary
that Jesus has arrived,
she leaves immediately and falls at his feet
making the same profession as her sister,
"Lord if you had been here,
my brother would not have died."

These sisters believe in Jesus so much
that they are willing to publicly attest,
in front of the disciples,
in front of their friends,

other Jews who have come to mourn with them,
that the sting of death
has no hold on Jesus.
And in their confession
that their brother would not have died,
we find the most powerful words
in this Gospel.

And, John, that master of storytelling that he is,
puts Jesus' most powerful proclamation
right in the very middle of his gospel.

Chapter 11, starting in verse 17,
marks the middle of John's good news
about Jesus the Christ.

So, hear these words:

¹⁷When Jesus arrived,
he found that Lazarus
had already been in the tomb four days.

¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem,
some two miles away,

¹⁹and many of the Jews
had come to Martha and Mary
to console them about their brother.

²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming,
she went and met him,
while Mary stayed at home.

²¹Martha said to Jesus,
"Lord, if you had been here,
my brother would not have died.

²²But even now
I know that God will give you
whatever you ask of him."

²³Jesus said to her,
"Your brother will rise again."

²⁴Martha said to him,
"I know that he will rise again

in the resurrection on the last day.”

²⁵Jesus said to her,
“I am the resurrection and the life.
Those who believe in me,
even though they die, will live,
²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me
will never die.
Do you believe this?”
²⁷She said to him,
“Yes, Lord, I believe
that you are the Messiah,
the Son of God,
the one coming into the world.”

Where O Death, is thy sting?
I am the Resurrection and the life.

These words are so powerful.
They are the theological heart of story.⁶
They are the words
echoed throughout Jesus’ life in this Gospel.
For those who believe,
death is a transition
that does not break the bond
between God and the believer.

Where O Death, is thy sting?
It’s everywhere,
but so is life.
Death may surround us,
but what Christ offers is **life**,
right here and right now.
In Christ, that abundant and eternal life,
is not meant as somewhere else,
out beyond us,
but meant to be grasped
right here and right now.

⁶ Ibid pg. 86

We preachers can too often
save Jesus' powerful words,
 I am the resurrection and the life,
 for funerals.
But Jesus offers us fullness of life right now
and that fullness of life
 is something we all need to hear
 and believe.
I am the resurrection and the life,
are words for every day.

And as his last sign,
 In John's Gospel,
he puts his proclamation, I am the resurrection and the life,
he puts those words to task,
 Jesus calls Lazarus from death's grasp.
 "He cried out with a loud voice,
 'Lazarus, come out!'
The dead man came out,
 his hands and his face wrapped in cloth.
 Jesus said to them,
 'Unbind him and let him go.'" (Jn. 11:43b-44)

"Now a certain man was ill,
Lazarus of Bethany..."
 Lazarus you see is us;
 bound by death in our current lives,
 yet called **deeper into this life**
 by Jesus
 who is the Light and the Life of the world.

The Resurrection and the Life
stands at the edge of our tombs,
shouting "Come out!"
 We can put in our own name
 for Lazarus's
 in order to hear Jesus' command,

and walk into the light of this day,
pulling free of our grave clothes
as we go.⁷

Where O Death is thy sting?
It's everywhere,
but so is the One
who is the resurrection and the life.

For Lazarus,
the Gospel does not describe his future,
but his present.

For us, the Gospel does not describe
only a resurrection and life
with Jesus that is to come,
but rather a resurrection and life
with Jesus,
right now.⁸

It's everywhere, seeing as you asked.

Benediction

Frederick Buechner writes, "Recent interviews with people who have been resuscitated after being pronounced clinically dead reveal that after the glimpse...they are very reluctant to be brought back again to this one. On the other hand, when Lazarus opened his eyes to see the figure of Jesus standing there in daylight beside him, he couldn't for the life of him tell which side he was on."⁹

⁷Alyce McKenzie, <https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2011/04/lazarus-is-us-alyce-mckenzie-04-04-2011>

⁸ Karoline Lewis, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-111-45-2>

⁹ Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* HarperSanFrancisco, 1979. Pg. 102