



**St. Andrew's By-the-Sea**  
*The Episcopal Church*  
*in Destin, Florida*

“Lazarus, a family friend, died”  
All Saints (observed), November 3, 2024  
John 11:1-45

A Homily by the Rev'd Jo P. Popham

I had a surrogate mother when I grew up. Her home is where I went when she needed my help but also when I needed hers. I also had dear dear friends whom I loved and who loved me and whose homes were like my own, even more than my own home. That is a most precious thing, to have a house, a home, to go to where we can go and be assured of love and peace and understanding.

Jesus had no home of his own. He had no place to lay his head. But in Bethany at Lazarus, and Mary, and Martha's house he found a place of love and peace. They did not laugh at his dreams. He could share his most inner thoughts with them. And he did. He could rest his weary feet. His friendship with Martha, Mary, and Lazarus was such a gift. It did not cost money to stay there. He didn't expect lavish hospitality. He could just “be” when he came home to Bethany.

When Mary and Martha sent a message to Jesus saying “Lord, he whom you love is ill” they knew that he would come to his friend (John 11:3). They did not insist that he come to Bethany at once. They knew that their simple statement that Lazarus was ill would bring Jesus to them. Friends do not desert those they love in their time of need.

William Barclay tells a story of two friends who served together in the First World War. “One of them was wounded and left lying helpless and in pain in no-man's-land. The other, at peril of his life, crawled out to help his friend; and, when he reached him, the wounded man looked up and said simply: “I knew you would come.” Can you imagine Jesus coming to our aid if we needed him? Well, he has, he does, and he will come whenever we are in need and call on him!<sup>1</sup>

Jesus had been in Jerusalem and had gone across the Jordan to where John had baptized many. So he stayed two days before heading to Bethany. As they were

going there he told the disciples that Lazarus had “fallen asleep” (John 11:11). They misunderstood, so he told them plainly “Lazarus is dead” (John 11:14). Jesus was not distressed, for he knew in theory that whatever was wrong with Lazarus, God would empower him to deal it. Jesus also knew that whatever happened in Bethany with his friend Lazarus, that it would lead him directly to the Cross. God would be glorified, would be revealed, and Jesus would also be exposed to all as who he was which would lead him to his own death.

Bethany is about 2 miles from Jerusalem and Martha caught up to Jesus and his disciples on the way. And she told the Lord, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” And even now “God will give you whatever you ask of him.” to which Jesus said: “Your brother will rise again.” Now Martha had heard Jesus’s promise of resurrection and believed him. She said that she believed him to be “the Messiah, the Son of God... (John 11:21-27). When Martha returned to their home she told Mary who went to Jesus at the edge of the village. The mourners who were at their home followed Mary thinking that she was going to the tomb to cry. She and the mourners caught up to Jesus; they were all weeping; Jesus asked where they had laid Lazarus. They said “Come and see. Lord, come and see.” Jesus broke down himself and started weeping. And so they went to the tomb arm in arm, weeping.

Squint up your eyes and visualize the scene. There were particular norms that had to be observed in a Jewish household at the death of a loved one. Because of the climate, burial needed to take place quickly. A funeral could be very costly because the finest ointments and spices were used to anoint the body which was then clothed in beautiful robes. Often valuables were buried in the tomb with the deceased. Families who buried their dead would actually try to outdo their neighbors in spending in excess. Rabbi Gamaliel the 2<sup>nd</sup> as the head of the Jewish community ended such burial extravagances sometime at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

From his time on dead bodies were wrapped in a simple linen dress, called a traveling dress.<sup>2</sup> Their customs included strict rules:

- While the body was in the house no meat was eaten, no wine was served.
- No study of Torah was to be done.
- The usual phylacteries (the Jewish fringes) were forbidden.
- No food could be prepared in the house.
- Food brought in could not be eaten in the presence of the deceased.
- When the body was taken out, all the furniture was removed and mourners had to sit on the ground or on low stools.
- Everyone came to the funeral, family, all mourners, and professional mourners. And they all processed to the tomb with the women first.
- Memorial speeches were made at the tomb.
- And then they would walk back to the home, quietly, so that they all could be alone in their sorrow. As they left the tomb they all said “Depart in peace.” And ever after when they mentioned the departed, they always invoked a blessing.
- Then a meal was served prepared by friends of the family, including bread, hard-boiled eggs, and lentils which symbolized life rolling on to death.
- Mourning lasted seven days (the first three were for weeping), during which no one could anoint themselves, or bathe, or put on shoes, or study or conduct their business.<sup>3</sup>

These customs had been observed and was continuing at Mary and Martha’s house when Jesus arrived at the tomb. He had expressed to Martha on the road that he himself was “the resurrection and the life” after Martha rightly said that she knew the Jewish belief in the life to come. But he was telling her – and he is telling us – that in death we can find a transition to a higher life, a more complete life, that we can be freed of fear, that life can be a new more lovely thing that we cannot conceive of ending.

So Jesus wept as he arrived at the door of Lazarus’s tomb. It was a usual Palestinian tomb – a natural cave or one cut in the rock with a groove where a large stone rolled like a cartwheel to seal the grave. In a usual burial cave there were shelves where bodies were laid. Lazarus’s body was covered with a linen shroud,

but his hands and feet were wrapped with bandage like wrappings; his head also was wrapped separately.

Jesus asked for the stone to be moved. Martha pointed out to Jesus that Lazarus had been dead for four days. Now the Jews believed that the spirit of the departed hovered around the tomb for four days seeking to enter the body again. But after four days the face of the body would be too decayed to be recognized. Martha pointed out that there be a stench. The King James Version reads: “But Lord, he stinketh!” He stinketh. That is one of those words that sounds like what it is.

One scholar says that we are all Lazarus. We are dead and lifeless, wrapped up, bound up, and stiff.<sup>4</sup> (Have any of us heard that Episcopalians are the chosen frozen?) But do we stinketh, until Jesus calls us out of the tomb do we stink? Until he orders us to set aside everything that binds us, and he breathes new life into us, are we frozen? Y’all, we can be a new creation. We can! Jesus gives us new life. He calls us, even today, to let go of what impedes us in living fully. We have the promise of the story of Lazarus. Jesus loves us! He brought life out of death. He weeps for and with us. And he shines life into the dark so that we can see.

So Lazarus came out when Jesus called him. He must have been startled by the brightness of the world of the living. In my imagination, I see Mary and Martha unbinding him. And I see them embracing one another, Jesus, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus as they walked back to their home, a home that welcomed Jesus as if it were his. Imagine with me the conversation around their table that night at dinner. Breaking bread with the newly raised must have been quite something. Jesus gave thanks, I am sure, just as he taught his own, as we were taught, to remember him re-member him, bring him back to life as we do every time we celebrate communion with one another. May we always bring Jesus back to life – as he brought Lazarus back – so that we have new life in us.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay on John 11, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/john-11.html>.

<sup>2</sup> To this day at Jewish funerals a cup is drunk to Rabbi Gamaliel.

<sup>3</sup> Their Jewish practices were and still are quite lovely. Credit for these practices to William Barclay, see above.

<sup>4</sup> “who stinketh? – a reflection on John 11:32-44” by The Rev. Rick Morley