

Called to Life, out of denial of death, or, Jesus , Mary, Martha and Lazarus—a hot mess in John 11

What good things can happen when we choose life and at the same time, don't deny death? Many of you walked with our family as my mother-in-law, Julie was diagnosed with terminal cancer in 2017 and died a little over a year ago. Although Julie did not like to talk about death and dying, she and we all knew that it was coming. We sometimes wondered if she was in denial. At her memorial service, pastor Ben Bouwman suggested that it wasn't so much that she was in denial, but that she had chosen life and wanted to live her life the way that it was meaningful for her as long as she possibly could. What she denied was the odds of surviving as long as she did. Even when one doctor said that she had received as much chemo as a body can handle, next thing we knew, she was doing another kind of chemo and then various other treatments. We thought she might just say, it's enough. I'm ready to go. Enough of the weariness, pain and suffering that the treatments caused. She wanted to live. Even in her last week of life, while we were begging her to take pain medications because she was clearly in pain, she really resisted. It seemed she wanted to live and die with a clear mind. And when it was time to let go, she did. I learned from her that choosing life in the face of

certain death, is courageous, and to do it with minimal pain medication, is a courage I don't know that I possess.

As we all walk through life, and as we age, where do we stand on the continuum of denial and acceptance as we think of our death? Every day, every hour, every minute we live is one step closer to death. None of us know how and when we will die. We really don't like talking about it. I kind of want to stop talking about it now and I bet many of you hope I move on soon before this sermon gets morbid. Who wants to stay in death when we can talk about resurrection???

Lazarus dies. Although Jesus loved him like a brother, Jesus did nothing to stop it. He waited 2 more days to even leave for Bethany instead of rushing to him to heal him. The Scripture says he arrived 4 days after Lazarus had died. That is 4 days of people mourning and his earthly body decomposing. That just doesn't seem very pastoral, does it? Scholars think that people then believed that a person's spirit could still return to their dead body within 3 days, but no way by day 4 or thereafter. The professional mourners have surely been around, doing their job to properly weep and wail and pay honor to this man who has died. I can imagine Psalm 130 being on the lips of his family and community, "out of the depths we cry to you." Or Psalm 23 "even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear

no evil for you are with me. But where was Jesus, the ONE we thought was the miracle maker, the healer, the Messiah?

When Jesus does finally show up, seemingly too late, isn't it fascinating that once again, just like in the passage last week about the man born blind, Jesus says that this has happened so that God will be glorified and the Son of God glorified through it? What does it mean to glorify God? Is it simply singing praise songs on Sunday mornings? If we want to glorify someone, we often build statues of them in prominent places so their name, and their fame will be known and will spread. But Yahweh said no to that idea of statues and images in the Hebrew Bible. And apparently, if I'm reading it right, we humans are the closest thing to the image of God. That's kind of weighty, is it not?

In the whole book of John, we see one miracle after another where Jesus says in essence, this sign is so that the name/Fame/reputation of God can be known and spread. This will reveal something about God and God's purposes with the cosmos that apparently the Law and the prophets couldn't quite do. So it was time to send Jesus, the fullest expression of God's essence in human form. All the miracles and the teaching and how Jesus lived were to build his case that people

should believe that Jesus is the one who the prophets foretold would come into the cosmos and set things straight.

And raising someone from the dead is one heck of a sign to point to who Jesus is and who he represents. This man can not only heal living people, but can bring a dead man back to life!

While he is building his case and people are believing he is the ONE they've been looking for, others see the same exact signs and build their case that there is *no way* he's the one. He just isn't fitting the nice, neat mold they had thoughtfully prepared for their Messiah.

As we prepare to enter into a new phase as a congregation that all have either agreed to or resigned themselves to, by inviting Credence and Co into our communal life, we will discover or re-discover that we have experienced and interpreted the same events and conversations in different ways. Everyone will be tempted to present evidence that supports their recollection of what happened and what it means. Some will make their case in a logical, stoic fashion and some will express themselves emotionally. And we will be tempted to judge their presentation. Some will be happy to speak up right away to get their point across and gladly elaborate on that, while others will be cautious and slow to speak. No

matter your personal style, we must all prepare ourselves to listen carefully and fully and find curiosity even when we think we know exactly what happened and what it means.

I mentioned earlier that it wasn't very pastoral of Jesus not to quickly rush to the aid of his friend who was dying and to let people begin their mourning of the dead. Jesus wasn't just a nice, gentle pastor type all the time, was he? He was also a prophet, an evangelist, a teacher and one sent by God with a mission. Perhaps this delay, this passage of time set the stage for that part of Jesus' identity to be revealed.

Perhaps the passage of time since certain conflictual situations arose here among us also has a purpose. Perhaps we have a chance to have our eyes smeared with mud and to wash in the pool like the blind man in last week's story. Perhaps we'll see a side of Jesus that is different than what we expect.

Perhaps we too can see the glory of God—the character, the nature of God—play out in our midst as we work through our disagreements, hurt and broken relationships. My hope is that we can move out of entrenchment to a place where we can really listen to each other again and find forgiveness, healing and restoration of relationships.

For some of us, it may feel like a miracle the size of raising Lazarus from the dead to ever get to that place. In Romans 8 it says that the same spirit that rose Christ from the dead dwells in you. If we don't believe that the same spirit that rose Jesus from the dead is working in us, and that through Jesus we can change our hearts and minds about things, then I am truly worried.

Let's go back to Martha's conversation with Jesus. She is clearly angry and disappointed that he didn't show up in time to save her brother. You could say she was a hot mess, as my 8th graders would say. But so was Jesus. He was emotionally all over the place too in this story—from being seemingly disinterested, to very confident, to weeping, to being disturbed/irritated maybe even angry as he walks to the tomb. So Martha and Jesus are both a hot mess as they're trying to talk this out and work this out.

So Martha, while she's mourning and angry and disappointed, she says this puzzling line, "Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you." So it seems there was some flicker of faith that something good could come from this, now that Jesus WAS there. That Jesus could do something. She affirms that she believes that her brother will be resurrected on the last day but clearly in her mind a bodily resurrection now is not even on the table. I think I'd be with Martha

on that. My mind would not be going there. Disappointed, confused, but trusting Jesus and really just trying to keep up with Jesus in this conversation. What is he getting at?

He says something pretty spectacular when he answers her, saying, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. And Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

This is the biggest, most mind-blowing revelation in the Jesus story to date.

People really don't know what he is talking about or how this is going to play out.

Is it just words? Is it just a metaphor, a spiritual truth that we try to wrap our minds around and conjure up some faith to believe it?

As move into these final weeks of Lent and as we go into Holy Week next week, we will be meditating on the death of Jesus, the betrayal of friends, the use of wrong means toward a wrong end, and loss of all hope for anything good to come out of it all. We will be practicing foot washing, which is typically about renewing commitment to serve one another, as Jesus served humanity through his life, death and resurrection.

And we are also moving into these final weeks leading up to Credence and Co coming to work with us. Jesus gave Martha a chance to respond honestly to His

words about being the resurrection and the life. What confession of faith are we being invited to make today?

Many or most of us here have confessed our belief that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior, the one who took on flesh, showed us a remarkable way to live and showed us what it looks like to take the consequences of our life choices. Jesus did not back down from the truth of who he was and what he was about, and it cost him his life. And when the time was right, he took the full consequences. He sacrificed his life so that we might live and we might point to Jesus as the one who makes all the difference in the world, in our lives. The one who pulls us out of the pit of despair, the one who looks for the lost sheep and rejoices over that one being restored even while the 99 are safe. You matter to Jesus.

So here's my argument for anyone who might be harboring a lot of doubt about this process coming up. You know how when you get a cut on your arm, it bleeds, you put some pressure on it, you clean it and then it forms a scab and then scar tissue forms and that scar tissue is actually stronger than the regular tissue. So yes, we have bled, maybe we need some pressure on the wound, some cleansing and even some stitches, but we can hope for some good strong scar tissue that will bind us together even stronger than before.

We have Jesus right here, still offering life over death, hope over despair. Will you say with Martha, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, Son of God, the one coming into the world.” I believe you are the resurrection and the life. I believe that we can get through being a hot mess together and come out on the other side more resilient, more like Jesus than when we started.

Let’s get the education, the tools, the language, the self-reflection and emotional maturity we need to walk through the dark valley together. To cry out of the depths, to find faith in the process and in Jesus’ ability to raise from the dead.

P.S. Although not mentioned in this sermon, there is a debate about whether Martha is really in John 11 and about Mary Magdalene, aka Mary the Tower. Here are some links if you would like to follow this debate.

<https://dianabutlerbass.com/wp-content/uploads/All-the-Marys-Sermon.pdf>

<https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/elizabeth-schrader-on-preaching-john#details>

https://margmowczko.com/martha-john-11-p66-elizabeth-schrader/#_ftn1

[https://www.thetextofthegospels.com/2019/08/mary-martha-and-john-](https://www.thetextofthegospels.com/2019/08/mary-martha-and-john-11.html?m=1)

[11.html?m=1](https://www.thetextofthegospels.com/2019/08/mary-martha-and-john-11.html?m=1) (in defense of a traditional reading)