

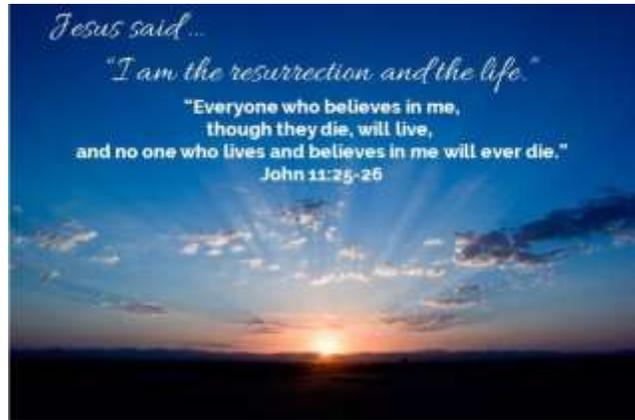
Fifth Sunday in Lent  
March 29, 2020

Third Sunday of Online Worship for  
COVID-19

Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

**Romans 8:31-38**  
**John 11:33-43**

**Series: A Lenten Encounter with Jesus:  
We Will Rise!**



A certain man named Lazarus was ill. He lived in Bethany, just 2 miles from Jerusalem in Judea, with his sisters Mary and Martha. This is the same family that entertained Jesus and his disciples at a dinner party in their home in Luke, chapter 10. Mary is the dreamer who broke all the rules of social convention when she became a disciple of Jesus, and Martha is her sister, who put a delicious meal on the table with no help from Mary; and Lazarus is their brother, *the one whom Jesus loved.*<sup>i</sup>

The sisters sent a message to Jesus that Lazarus was sick. "Please, come right away!" It said. But Jesus didn't come. He stayed two more days in the place where he was.

Finally, Jesus told his little band, *Let's go to Judea now...our friend Lazarus is dead.* What!? Can you imagine their shock and dismay? They had seen Jesus heal the son of a Roman officer,<sup>ii</sup> and a paralyzed man.<sup>iii</sup> They'd seen him walk on water!<sup>iv</sup> He could've taken care of whatever was wrong with Lazarus. But he didn't. Instead, he stayed where he was for two more days.

When they finally came near Bethany, Martha came out to meet him on the road. And she gave him the business! She said:

*If you had been here my brother would not have died!*

Possibly true. On the other hand there were many people in Galilee and Judea who died young in those days; Jesus didn't heal every one of them. If Jesus had been there, would Lazarus have died? Martha didn't think so.

*Your brother will rise again.* Jesus told her.

Martha shook her head. *I know; he'll live again in the resurrection on the last day.*

"No Martha, you don't understand. This isn't just some kind of lesson on the doctrine of the afterlife; this is me, Jesus, talking to you."

*I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.*

*Do you believe that Martha? Do you?*

After that, Martha went and called her sister, Mary. Here's the rest of the story from John, chapter 11, beginning at verse 33:

*When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"*

*Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"*

*So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the people, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

They are just about my favorite family in all of scripture. Martha, who always spoke her mind, Mary, who was all heart, and Lazarus, the one Jesus, and everybody else, loved. This little family, they're just like the rest of us.

Have you ever wanted to ask Jesus:

Where were you? When the one I love got that diagnosis...

When Coronavirus jumped from animals to humans?

When the number of cases surged...

When there weren't enough gowns, masks and ventilators...?

If you'd been here, Jesus, would this all be happening?!

Martha is just saying what most of us have thought at some point. It's part of our natural survival impulse – to accuse God of absence when terrible things happen. That's better than imagining Jesus was here ...but did nothing. That's intolerable.<sup>v</sup>

Listen friends: the Bible clearly says that God is present and active in every situation. Not a sparrow falls to the ground apart from God's notice.<sup>vi</sup> It's precisely in the times when we think that there is no hope, or that we have failed, or when we feel completely alone – these are the times when God is actually closest to us. When we call out for help -- Jesus comes!

He comes and shares our sorrow;  
he raises us up,  
and he uses us in that work of resurrection to raise each other.

Admittedly Jesus didn't come on Martha's schedule. I don't know about you, but that is always a problem for me. I'm like Martha -- I think I know what everybody needs and I don't mind saying it. But Jesus has other plans, better plans. He explains, very clearly, that he delayed coming to Lazarus *for the sake of the people, so that they might believe...so that we might believe.*

Raising Lazarus is a turning point in John's story of Jesus, that moment when it all starts to come together and make sense. Jesus' delay is where Martha focused her grief, but the truth is that Lazarus had been dead four days. He probably died very shortly, just hours after she sent word to Jesus.

And Lazarus will rise...because *nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus* – NOTHING, not even death can separate us. In just a few days Jesus will rise, and because he lives we will live also!<sup>vii</sup> That is the gift he gave us...eternal life. WE WILL RISE!

Before we get to the resurrection there is compassion. Jesus wept. Five hundred years earlier, the prophet Isaiah announced that the Messiah would be *a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.*<sup>viii</sup> And that he was.

Jesus wept. He wept in sorrow for his friend; he wept in frustration for how little we humans understand his saving power. He wept in anticipation of what was about to happen in his own life. Jesus wept. He is weeping now. And so are we.

In one way or another we are all grieving now –

we're grieving the deaths and the illnesses,  
grieving the loss of freedom and  
our broken economy;

Some of us are grieving our jobs,  
our children's school experiences.  
We are all grieving our separation from friends and loved ones.

This is hard.

God's heart is also breaking. God knows our sorrow and is well acquainted with our grief.

There's a well-traveled story about a little guy who came home late from playing at a friend's house. Remember when kids could play at a friend's? His mom asked him why he was late and he answered honestly:

“Jimmy broke his favorite truck.”

“Oh,” said mom, “you stayed to help him fix it?”

Her son looked serious and said, “No, Mom, I stayed to help him cry.”

Jesus came to help Mary and Martha, and the first thing he did was help them cry. Fear and frustration and sorrow had the sisters bound up in grief. Their brother needed release and so did they. One of the most important truths in this passage is a reality -- that when this horrid virus, or any other disease or accident or illness steals the life of one of God’s precious children, God’s is the first of all our hearts to break.

A wise person said that Jesus didn’t come to the world to take away our pain. He came to take our pain on himself. <sup>ix</sup> Even now he is absorbing our sorrow and leading us through our grief.

He *is* the resurrection and life. Do you believe that?

Death cannot touch us. COVID-19 will do its best to hold us, but Jesus comes. He always comes. He shows up every time to unbind us. He calls us out of our tombs, blinking out into the light.

This time too, WE WILL RISE!

It may take four weeks, or four months, or, God-forbid, four years, but WE WILL RISE!

You may say, “But this time is different, because COVID-19 is different; none of us has ever seen anything like this.” That’s true. This is hard, and it may get harder. But it is precisely then, in the most difficult of times, that our Lord comes to us. With Lazarus WE WILL RISE.

Henri Nouwen is one of my favorite Christian writers. He passed away a few years ago. Shortly before his death he wrote this:

“When we reach beyond our fears  
To the One who loves us with a love  
That was there before we were born  
And will be there after we die  
Then. ...even death will be unable to take our freedom

Once we have come to the deep inner knowledge...  
That we are born out of love  
And will die into love,  
That every part of our being is deeply rooted in love,  
And that this love is our true father and mother,  
Then all forms of evil, illness and death  
lose their final power over us.”

*Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus...Nothing. Not hardship or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword – Not Coronavirus! No! We are more than conquerors through him who loved us! Receive that truth; let it take root deep down inside you and grow. That's when you will be free, alive, unbound, even while you are homebound.*

**WE WILL RISE!**

In fact, if we play this right we will rise stronger, a renewed and remade people, because we have come to understand and love one another more than we love the events and outings and things that used to fill our lives. We will have learned to smile and wave to neighbors when we pass. We'll have discovered how hard teachers work, and what an incredible blessing it is to be able to worship together in this place.

When all this is over, maybe we won't even have to force ourselves to go to the gym! And we will never again take visiting our grandparents or our grandchildren for granted, or having a drink with friends, or going to school. We will celebrate simple freedoms as the gift of God that they are, and we will cherish our health care professionals, scientists, first responders, military, volunteers, store clerks and delivery people -- cherish and celebrate them for the national heroes they are!

Can I get an Amen?! This week one of you heard that I'd be preaching on the resurrection of Lazarus and you sent me a video. I love it when you do that! This is called "We Will Rise." Watch.

[Rising Up Across America \(Today Show 26MAR2020\) ...](#)

<https://www.youtube.com > watch>

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<sup>i</sup> John 11:3

<sup>ii</sup> John 4:46-54

<sup>iii</sup> John 4:1-15

<sup>iv</sup> John 6:16-24

<sup>v</sup> Anna Carter Florence, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Feb/Mar 2008, 50.

<sup>vi</sup> Matthew 10:20

<sup>vii</sup> John 14:19

<sup>viii</sup> Isaiah 53:3

<sup>ix</sup> Samuel G. Candler, "Unbind Him and Let Him Go" from the *Day1* radio broadcast. Day1.org