

March 9, 2008

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Romans 8:6-11

St. John 11:1-45

John 11:1-45

¹Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, "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." ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹²The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

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."

²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.

³⁹Jesus 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." ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The 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."

⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

The story reads: “Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany...So the sisters sent a message to Jesus.”

Lazarus was sick. He was dying. His sisters, Mary and Martha, sent a youth from the village to bring Jesus. Jesus was the one man who could prevent tragedy.

The messenger left before dawn. It was a steep descent from Bethany to Jericho and the path was narrow until it joined the larger road that went south to Jerusalem. But he was familiar with the way and he made good time even in the dark.

The town where Jesus was staying was east, across the river. As the sun came over the hills in the Jordan Valley, the messenger had come to an even section and was making good time.

He was glad he had been asked to carry this message. Everyone wanted to do something to help. Everyone in the village knew Lazarus and his sisters. Everyone loved them. This was an important job.

He was headed east. The sun cracked between two hills and shined in his eyes so he had to squint and be careful of his footing. **He didn't know that his trip was unnecessary.** Shortly after he had left the village Lazarus had died.

The people back in the village knew. The ritual of grief is well known in that part of the world. When the neighbors heard the cries they knew what had happened. Everyone knew how sick Lazarus had been. People were already gathering at the home back in Bethany as the messenger emerged from the hillside road and caught his first view of the village where Jesus was staying. It was across the Jordan, still miles away.

In Bethany, Lazarus' eyes were closed. It was his sisters' job to bathe the body. They rubbed him with olive oil mixed with perfume. They may have wondered what would have happened if Jesus had stayed. If **he** had been there, they would have a weak brother who was getting better, instead of a dead brother who was being anointed for burial.

Long thin bands of linen cloth were wound around the body. They wrapped the legs and bound the arms close to the sides. Spices were put between the layers of the bandages. As the bands reached the neck, the sisters knew this was the last time they would see their brother's face.

His head held high, his arms pumping, the messenger had caught his second wind as he was striding across the last part of his mission. The village where Jesus was staying was clearly visible now across from Jericho. Soon he could give his call for life and the great healer would hurry up to Bethany and prevent this death.

The mourners gathered in and around the sisters' home. They began the customary litany of chants and prayers and lamentations. The sisters were supported in their grief as the whole village accompanied them on the walk through the center of the houses and shops and over to the graveyard. The wrapped body was carried first, on a stretcher. The sisters followed. The men walked behind them in two rows. Finally, the women, wringing their hands and throwing dirt in the air.

The family tomb had been cut into the low hillside facing Bethany for a long time. The body was laid on a shelf. There was a final prayer and more perfume was passed into the tomb. Oil was added to a lamp in a niche above the body. A slab of limestone was fit into the opening. The tomb was closed.

At long last the exhausted messenger reached the floor of the valley and made his way across the Jordan River. He reported that Lazarus was failing quickly. He pleaded that Jesus come immediately. It wasn't noon yet. There was still enough time to hurry back to Bethany before total darkness set in on the most dangerous part of the road.

Between gasps for breath, the messenger heard the calm unhurried voice of Jesus saying, "This illness does not lead to death."

In Bethany, Mary and Martha returned to their home from the graveyard and began the week of mourning.

This is a frustrating story. All that effort. The energy of the messenger. His hopes for helping to avert this tragedy. His willingness to go to any lengths... **and Jesus would not come.** When the messenger got back to Bethany **he found it had all been for nothing.** Every stride he took across the Jordan Valley to save Lazarus - had been taken with Lazarus already dead.

If only he had known. **He would not have wasted his time.** The messenger started too late. Jesus would not do **what** the messenger wanted him to do; and he wouldn't do anything **when** the messenger wanted him to do it. He had wasted his time.

He started too late. Jesus would not cooperate.

Yet, when all was said and done...Lazarus was alive.

It was hopeless. The sick man was already dead. The healer wouldn't do anything. It was hopeless. But Jesus said, "This illness does not lead to death." And, even though Lazarus had died, ...it didn't. The sickness was not unto death, because they sent a messenger to Jesus.

In the face of death. In the face of God choosing his own time and his own actions, still they called upon God. And when all was said and done, Lazarus was alive. Lazarus' sickness was not unto death.

If even death is not a sickness unto death...what is?

Hopelessness is the sickness unto death. Hopelessness keeps us from sending a messenger to Jesus.

Are we willing to call upon God to come and bring life...or do we think it is a waste of time? Have we run out of hope?

When you wake up in the morning and it is time to pray to God to take your life in his hands. It's time to call upon God to direct you and guide you. You need wisdom and courage and kindness to live the day the way God intends for you to live. Why do you hesitate? Is it

because you think the prayer is hopeless? Do you say, "It's probably too late...and God never does what we want him to."

We've called upon God before, and before the day was over, we were angry. We'd thought the worst of people. We said things that hurt someone's feelings.

It's embarrassing to keep calling on God, and then not listen to him, or not hear him if he does try to guide us.

We hesitate to call upon God because we don't see how it can make any difference. We think it's too late. We think our lives are set and there's nothing left to do but wrap them for burial.

Hopelessness is the sickness unto death. Hopelessness doesn't mean we can't bring God into our lives. It means we won't try.

Send a messenger. Call Jesus. Call him to a world that's already dead. The world may look like it's too late, but "This sickness is not unto death."

Call Jesus and see all the ways he has of bringing life to a dead world. There are hungry people; don't lose hope that they can be fed. There are people who are afraid of life; it is not too late for them to find peace. There are lonely people; it is not a waste of time to call Jesus to love them.

Don't judge the chances of Jesus being able to change things. The messenger would never have bothered Jesus if he had known Lazarus was already dead. And, I suppose, Lazarus would have stayed that way.

Don't give Jesus a time table. The messenger would not have made the effort if he had known Jesus would not come immediately. And the four days of waiting would have stretched into forever.

Call on God. Even as you see that you are still angry at that person you have been trying to feel kindness for. Even as you said things about a person that you don't know are true. Call

on God even when you think of how you refuse to listen and don't want to understand new ideas, even when you would rather be wrong than change your mind.

Even as you are wrapping your soul in linen and spices - preparing it for burial - send a messenger. This sickness is not unto death. Not as long as we will send the messenger for Jesus, as long as our hope is in God's power and God's time.

Our lives are not the way we want them; don't give in to hopelessness. Send for Jesus. We have gathered here as a church because we will not settle for death.

We hope for life.

As long as we see the sin in our lives as a thing to be changed and not a thing to be accepted, as long as we call upon God no matter what we think of his chances for success, we will never be so dead that Jesus cannot call us out of the tomb.