

John 11:1-16 (17-45)
“On the Brink”

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Rev. David Pierce

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

It starts out as a story so old and familiar that we almost don’t need to have it read for us. Someone is sick. We’re not told how sick they are. Maybe no one knows. Maybe no one wants to say. We know this person who is sick, though not very well. It’s more that we know their family. His sister is your best childhood friend. You go way back with her—Friday night sleep overs, birthday parties, graduation, and everywhere you turned her brother was always there. Pesky, but also incredibly sweet at times.

Then one day your sister calls to say that her best friend’s brother—you remember him, she says, pesky but incredibly sweet at times—he is sick. Can you come, she asks you?

Now for some of us the decision is easy. We don’t even need to ask just how sick he is or how long he is expected to live. We won’t even bother to check our available time-off. We hop the next train or plane and we’re there. But for others of us, including Jesus apparently, the decision is more complicated. For after hearing that his friend Lazarus is sick, we’re told that Jesus stays two days longer where he is. (And this is where the story starts to sound less familiar to us.)

Can anyone say for sure why Jesus doesn’t hop on the first camel he can find to get to Lazarus? As Bible readers, we are often given more information about what’s going on in a story than are those who had to live out the story, and this can cause us to forget certain things, like how it must have come across to Lazarus’s sisters, Mary and Martha, when they heard, “Yeah, he’s not coming.”

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.”

But Mary and Martha don't hear him say this, and even the disciples who do hear him say this, they don't get it. They figure it's just the kind of thing someone says when they want to make you feel like things aren't as bad as they seem.

I've often wondered, though, if Jesus didn't know *exactly* how bad things were for Lazarus, but he just didn't like hospital waiting rooms. Nothing ever seems to happen in waiting rooms. "I'd prefer to stay busy. Call me or come get me when you've got more news." Maybe that was Jesus. We can be so hard on the ones who don't drop everything to come, except maybe Jesus knew there's something even worse than death. Despair. Empty living. Despair is worse than death.

So, Jesus doesn't rush to Bethany. Even though Mary and Martha have asked him to come, telling him in no uncertain terms, it would mean a lot to us if you would come, Jesus holds out for two days until, on the third day, he announces to his disciples *plainly*—that's the word in verse 14—he tells them without any drama, "Lazarus is dead." Then, this, verse 15, "For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

And we can hear the grumblings, the disappointment. "Now? Jesus, you've known for two days that Lazarus was sick and on the brink. But when you could have done something to comfort him and the sisters, you did nothing! And now that he's dead you expect us to believe you and to go with you?"

Let me ask you something. When you look around these days, what appears to be on the brink? What are you afraid of losing, of having to let go of and never getting back? Or maybe it's something or someone that is already lost. Something you'd bring back if you could but right now it just feels dead to you. A job, the feeling of security that comes from having a job? An important friendship or a connection to a piece of your past? Maybe you're expecting a baby and as thrilling as that is, you're afraid of losing your independence and quiet time, and it's got you feeling like you're teetering on the edge. Maybe your children are grown and getting ready to head out the door and you're feeling like less of a mom or dad these days. You know who your children are becoming. You just don't know who you're becoming.

What feels like it's on the brink for you? Who or what are you barely hanging on to?

Collectively I believe we must do more than to acknowledge only the personal right now. We must also speak of the hundreds of thousands of refugees who are flooding the streets out of Nigeria and South Sudan and Syria today, fleeing because their countries and governments are no longer safe. And we must speak of the children in South African and also in south Chicago who are living on the edge, children who will go to bed tonight without any food to eat. And we must speak of young boys being lost to gangs and young girls being lost to trafficking, and the prisoner sitting on death row who does not know the love or mercy of God.

When Mary and Martha send word to Jesus about Lazarus they feel the need to remind him, “Lord, it’s he whom you love.”

What a curious thing to say. Doesn’t Jesus know he loves Lazarus? Don’t the sisters know it? I’m sure they do. Maybe it’s them though, maybe it’s Mary and Martha who haven’t felt the love of God in so long. Caring for their brother night and day, everyone else just assumes he’s being taken care of. But who’s taking care of Mary and Martha?

“Jesus, we’re on the brink,” they say. “Can you come?”

It’s worth noting that among the disciples there was one who didn’t grumble and act all disappointed with Jesus when Lazarus died. It was Thomas. That’s right. The one who would later come to be branded a doubter for not believing that Jesus has been raised from the dead—he said he needed to see to believe—he’s the only one who, for the moment, gets that there are worse things than death. Despair. Despair is worse than death. And so, upon hearing that Lazarus has died, Thomas, believing that Jesus must still be up to something good, tells his fellow disciples, “Let us go die with him.”

I probably don’t need to tell you how the story ends. It is a well-known ending. On his way to Bethany Jesus finds out that Lazarus has been dead and in the grave for four days already. Martha comes out to meet him first, followed by Mary. Both women tell him the same thing. “Lord, had you been here my brother would not have died.”

“Your brother will rise again,” Jesus tells Martha.

“Yes, yes, I know,” Martha responds. “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

And Jesus hits her with those most famous words of his, “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 this?”

Then, turning to the crowds who have come out with Mary and Martha, he asks, “Where have you laid him?”

“Come and see,” they direct him.

The story writer notes that up until now Jesus has not cried. Not upon hearing that Lazarus is sick or dead, nor upon seeing his sisters’ sorrow. But upon realizing the crowds are never going to believe in what they cannot see, Jesus weeps. That unless they can see Lazarus alive again, they are never going to believe in God’s power to heal or to give life. And because Jesus desperately wants us to believe in life at all costs, he goes and stands before Lazarus’s tomb and cries, “Lazarus, come out!” And Lazarus does.

My question has always been, did Lazarus want to? Knowing especially that he would have to die again someday, did Lazarus want to come back to life? Upon hearing Jesus say, come on out of there, did he sit inside his tomb for a while mulling it over? The final chapter of Revelation tells us that in the celestial city there will be neither pain nor sadness nor crying anymore. Doesn’t sound like any place I’d ever want to leave. Then again, Lazarus didn’t have much time to get used to being there. Just four days. When he comes out of his tomb, he’s still wrapped in his grave clothes. Is that how it works? We come out on the other side much the same way we went in? I do believe the addict gets to come out clean on the other side, and the abused child no longer has to lie down in fear. But does the paraplegic get his limbs back in heaven? Will the person who had Alzheimer’s remember again? Will each of us get to be our own best version of ourselves again someday? We’re told that when Jesus himself came back from the other side, you could still see the marks from the nails that had killed him. I wonder if he liked himself that way.

Not too long ago a friend put me on to the writings of Amy Julia Becker, who writes mostly about her daughter Penny and what it’s been like to raise a child who has Down

Syndrome. Most recently she wrote an article in which she bravely and honestly takes on the question, “*Would I cure her if I could?*” She says,

Learning how to accommodate people with disabilities...is a crucial act in expanding our definition of humanity and of recognizing the common good that comes from policies and practices of love and inclusion rather than conformity and exclusion. I used to worry that I would compare Penny to myself and find her lacking. Now I either find our points of commonality—her love of reading, her hesitance in large groups, her difficulty expressing negative emotions—or I see the ways I want to learn from her. I see her contented hard work—trying for two years to muster the courage and strength to do the monkey bars, practicing one song on the piano 10 times over without banging the keys from frustration (as I used to do), practicing math problems day in and day out without protest. I see her willingness to forgive. I see the pleasure she receives from a cheeseburger, or a moment side by side on the couch, or an invitation to dance with her dad. I no longer want Penny to be like me. In so many ways, I want to be like her.¹

I don’t know how it’s all going to look in the end. I do think that if the story of Lazarus and Jesus is true, and I do believe it is, then it means we don’t have to wait to get someplace else before something good can happen. For today, after *four days* in the ground, Jesus is calling Lazarus back into this world. “Lazarus, come out!” Could it be? Yes, I do believe in new life even on this side of eternity! Amen.

¹ By Amy Julia Becker, “*My daughter has Down Syndrome. Would I ‘cure’ her if I could?*” Published on Vox.com, 8/3/16.