

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
March 22, 2026 (Lent A)
John 11:1-45

“Tell Me Something Good. Why Are You Wearing Those Grave Clothes?”

During Lent, we've been following Jesus in John's gospel, and we've met all sorts of interesting people along the way. We met the Samaritan woman at the well and I talked about grace and how God accepts us and loves us for who we are, flaws and all; We also met Jesus in the desert where he was tempted by the devil, and I talked about how we're called to be bearers of good news, not cranky Christians! And I announced in that sermon that I was giving up Lent for Lent, or at least how we normally think about Lent as one long funeral procession to Good Friday. Instead, I'm taking on a new Lent: one focused on new life, and good things, because Lent is not a march to Good Friday. It's a march to Easter. And I think we're better prepared to meet Easter if we are people of good news, noticing the good news around us, and Taking a moment to appreciate the good and being grateful. And last week we met the blind man, and learned that when life deals us hard blows, no one is to blame, including God, because God is a God of love.

Now, what I haven't mentioned, is that John's gospels calls these encounters signs. They are signs of John's mind-boggling assertion that God came to us in the life of a Palestinian Jew named Jesus. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” John announced in the first paragraph of his book, “and here are some stories to help you see what that means.”

Now, signs are good. Signs point us in the right direction, whether that's a sign in a building or a street sign. Have you ever been in a new building and couldn't find where you needed to go because of a lack of signage? It can be quite frustrating. So signs are important to keep us going in the right direction and on the right path.

Today we met Martha, Lazaus' sister. Lazarus was the man Jesus brought back from the dead. This is Jesus' final sign in John's gospel and probably the most incredible of them all. It's not every day that a man who's been dead in a tomb four days is brought back to life.

But, before you start asking whether something like this could actually happen or not, please know that such scientific or even philosophical questions are not important to

John. So don't get hung up on the details of the sign, because what's important is what the sign points to, and this sign points to life-to your life, to my life, and to the full, rich, and wonderful life God wants us to live and to enjoy.

So friends, here's the good news today at the very beginning so you don't miss it: God gave you life, and God wants you to enjoy your life. God wants you live a full life, a life of grace and love, and enjoyment. God really does want you to have fun! That's the good news and the simple message today. Go out and have some fun!

The story about Lazarus is a story about life, not death.

Mary, Martha and Lazarus were very close friends of Jesus. They were about his age, 30 or so. They were Jesus' adult friends, the ones who you want to have dinner with, the friends you go on vacation with, the ones with whom you don't have to pretend to be anyone but who you are. Friends like that are very precious. We don't know if Jesus had many friends like that. But we do know that these three are those kinds of friends. He eats at their table. He talks things over with them. When he needs a place to stay overnight during a visit to Jerusalem, he stays with them. The Gospel of John tells us Jesus loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus. It's the only instance of John specifically naming people Jesus loved.

When Lazarus becomes sick, Mary and Martha send word to Jesus. But when word reaches Jesus that his dear friend Lazarus is sick, he does something very odd-he stays where he is, for two days! One would think that when summoned, Jesus would drop everything to be with his friends at Lazarus' bedside, but instead, he waits two days to go Bethany.

and, sure enough, when he arrives, he finds that Lazarus has been dead in the tomb for four days. Friends from the village have already gathered at the home. They've brought food and they sit with the grieving sisters and try to be helpful and say comforting things.

when Martha sees Jesus coming down the road, she is not happy. In fact, she's angry- really angry. She tells him: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." In other words, you could have prevented this! If you hadn't spent those two extra days doing Lord knows what and had come when I asked you to come, Lazarus wouldn't be dead in that tomb.

It's an honest and valid complaint. And we can learn something from it. We can learn that faith is not without feelings of anger in times of crisis (Francis Taylor Gench, "Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John"). And that it's OK to be angry with God.

But Martha's pain is also intertwined with her faith, and her faith in God tells her that there may still be hope. "I know God will give you whatever you ask of him," she says. Martha knows Jesus has performed some pretty incredible signs, so she still holds out some hope that *maybe* he can do something for her brother.

Jesus responds with a promise: "Your brother will rise again,"

To Which She replies in kind: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." It's an affirmation of her faith, which promises her that when the world ends, the dead will live again.

But Jesus offers her something much more than this: "I am the resurrection and the life," he says. "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?"

These words bring us to the very heart of this story and, indeed, to the very heart of John's gospel. Because what Jesus offers in John's Gospel is a full and rich life now. Let me say that again. What Jesus offers us is a full and rich life now. For John, eternal life is much more than what awaits us on the other side of the tomb; eternal life is what Jesus offers us now-and it's rich, and full and full of joy. and we don't need to wait until we die to enjoy it.

Of course, this isn't how we normally think of eternal life. In the popular mindset, Christianity is about life after death, getting to heaven when you die. That's what people equate with eternal life. And it is about that, but it's about something much more than that, too. It's about life now-full, rich, complete, deep, free, whole; life now. "Eternal life," Jesus calls it. It's a quality of life that begins now. "I have come," he said, "that you have life and have it fully; I have come that my life-my joy-may live in you."

Jesus wants us to live our lives fully and completely now, not wait until we reach the other side to start living.

The church would do well, I think, to encourage people to live life more fully, not less so. Somehow, people have gotten this idea that God doesn't really want us to enjoy our

lives or anything the world has to offer. I suppose it stems from our Puritan roots. But as William Sloane Coffin once observed, there's something wrong when a little boy he knew said, "Religion is all the things you're not supposed to do."

We get it into our heads somehow that God doesn't really want us to enjoy what life has to offer. That what God really wants us to do is read the Bible and pray a lot and think holy thoughts and avoid doing all the things on the list of worldly activities that must be sinful. Why, just recently I read the words of another preacher who wrote that growing up, "he always had the sense that loving the world too much was dangerous, full of temptations of the flesh: music and great movies and good food and baseball even on Sundays—Sunday doubleheaders, missing church to drive to the baseball game with his father, and little brother, and two uncles and sit in the Field to watch baseball and eat hot dogs all day long. He thought it was paradise. It was a lot better than Sunday School." But somehow, he had it in his head that it wasn't right with God. (*John Buchanan*)

But then he had a conversion, and grew to realize that the world is a beautiful and good place; that God made it and everything in it and called it good, including human minds and human creativity and human bodies. And that living fully, enjoying this good world fully, is a way of praising and giving glory to God. It's what God wants us to do; God wants us to live our lives fully and completely. So, for goodness sake, take off whatever grave clothes you might be wearing and start living!

Henry David Thoreau said he wished to learn what life had to teach now "and not when I come to die, discover that I had not lived." (Gench, page 87)

Or Marian Wright Edelman said once: "Do not die before you die. See and listen. Bask in the countless miracles and beauty all around you. Stay awake and alert to the incredible currents of life everywhere" (*The Sea Is So Wide and My Boat Is So Small*, p.57).

And Wendell Berry wrote this: "The question before me, now that I am old, is not how to be dead, which I know from enough practice, but how to be alive, as these worn hills still tell, and some paintings of Paul Cezanne, and this mere singing wren, who thinks he's alive forever, this instant, and may be" ("Given").

"Eternal life," Jesus calls it. "I have come," he said, "that you have life and have it fully; I have come that my life-my joy-may live in you."

Sometimes I wonder what Lazarus did after he came out of the tomb? Especially since we never hear from him again. I'm guessing he went home and took a shower and changed his clothes . . . but then, I bet and I hope he went out and celebrated and really lived life!

"Unbind him, and let him go!" is both our mandate and marching orders, for the God who answered Jesus' prayer in bringing Lazarus back from the dead, the God who raised Jesus from death, the God who promises us life eternal... this God is not finished with us yet! So why are you still wearing those grave clothes? Take off those rags and start living!

"Unbind him and let him go." God hates death and the ways of death. He hates all the ways we've managed to tie ourselves up. He hates how we've wandered into tombs and graves.

So the message today is live. Live today and every day. Open your eyes and mind and heart and soul to the stunning fact of your own life. Don't put that off. "I have come," Jesus said, "that you-everyone- may have life and have it fully; I have come that my life-my joy-may live in you-and everyone else, too."

Live, as the great theologian Karl Barth put it, like children on Christmas morning, surrounded by gifts we did nothing to deserve, our hearts brimming with gratitude, and our lives full of joy.

Amen.

Sources:

Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, Lent-Eastertide

www.workingpreacher.org

Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John, Frances Taylor Gench

"What the Last I Can Believe and Still Be A Christian", Martin Thielen