



North
Leightonstone
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Alconbury, Buckworth, Hamerton, The Giddings,
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Sermon for 29th March 5th Sunday of Lent

Reading for the Day – John 11:1-45

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

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

¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, ^[c] said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus ^[d] had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles ^[e] away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' ²³ Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' ²⁴ Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' ²⁵ Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. ^[f] Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?'

²⁷ She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, ^[g] the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

²⁸ When 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.' ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ The

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. ³² When 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.'³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.'³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' ³⁷ But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ 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 for four days.'⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² I 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.'

⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'

⁴⁴ 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.'

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

The Sermon - Jesus and Lazarus

Revd Mandy Flaherty

This is a long and involved story of a family who go through the most traumatic of times and are dealing with very painful loss, confusion and chaos. It all takes place over a period of about 6 or 7 days – during which the family appear to go from living their lives somewhat normally to losing a loved one in very difficult circumstances, experiencing feelings of fear, blame, anger, distress and huge loss. It is certainly a tale for our times. How many of us are mourning the loss of our lives in different ways over the period of 6 or 7 days? For some, tragically, the actual loss of life to the CoronaVirus. So, this story of Jesus' relationship with the family of Martha, Mary and Lazarus speaks very powerfully to us in our very present crisis.

There was clearly a sense of worry and foreboding on Martha and Mary's part because they sent for Jesus when Lazarus became ill. He wasn't getting any better and they needed help from their best friend. It takes Jesus a while to get to them and we are not given an explanation of why he doesn't go straight away but he appears to imply that Lazarus' illness was not that serious. Of course it turned out to be very serious and he dies. The shock and disappointment on the part of Martha and Mary was palpable when Jesus does eventually get there - 'if you had been here, he would have lived' They

display the very human emotions of distress, anger and panic when the resources that they so rely on don't seem to be there for them. If there has been one major topic of this Corona Virus crisis it has been about the lack of resources and the timing of actions to combat the disease. Many in our country are experiencing exactly what Martha and Mary experienced – panic because resources aren't there for their loved ones and the fact that we are all subject to the timing of this epidemic in our country. In these times, when we are fearful that we might lose our loved ones, we are also angry and disappointed by the actions of others and their reaction which is different from ours. It all comes from a place of fear and painful loss. Mary knew deep down that Jesus did care, far more than anyone else, but she was hurt and angry that he had ill-timed his visit to her. In the days to come, as we go through the worst that this virus has to throw at us, there will be times of panic, fear and anger – when things are missed and people are hurt, and die. I have described Mary so far as she is the one who appears to really resent Jesus at this time – she stays home, to be consoled by others and rebukes him for not being here. Her sister, Martha, on the other hand, goes out to meet Jesus, says the same to him as Mary does because she is understandably hurt and angry but adds that she trusts him to speak to God who will give him whatever he asks. She displays faith. In the midst of her sorrow, she displays faith. We are going to hear of many Marthas over the coming weeks and months I am sure – people who have faith, even in the midst of loss and pain. People who are brave and selfless, who go the extra mile and save lives.

And so, Jesus changes their circumstances completely and at the end of their traumatic week their brother is restored to them, come back from the dead, to live again. Perhaps, like me, you have seen the extraordinary footage on TV of doctors and nurses in a Spanish hospital applauding a man who is finally able to breathe on his own again as his ventilator is removed. The staff applaud the moment when a man is brought back to life, with tears in their eyes. It is indeed a momentous moment. It is a Lazarus moment. I was sent a text the other day from a former colleague of mine who said 'I don't know that I have ever asked for such an important prayer as this ever in my life' And she goes on to describe a friend's daughter who is a young woman who is in critical care in Peterborough hospital with Covid-19. She went downhill fast and was fighting for her life the day before yesterday. I got a text from her yesterday evening to say that she was mightily relieved as she was now much improved and said 'the power of prayer'. Another Lazarus moment.

Alongside all the tragedy and the climbing figures, I am sure we are going to see and hear about Lazarus moments – when someone comes back to life and recovers and is restored, when health professionals save lives, when we pray and see someone come back to full health, when fear and worry disappears from someone's face because they have seen kindness and have been helped in some way, when faith is displayed in the face of extreme and difficult odds. Alongside the trauma, we will see hope. I am not one of those

who thinks that God is either punishing us or is too far away from us at this time, rather he is right in the midst of us and walking alongside us helping us through it. Getting stuck in and performing miracles. Restoring life and giving hope. So, each time we pray for someone, each time we give some help to someone, each time we comfort someone who is hurting, we are God's hand on earth and, I am sure, we will see Lazarus moments.

Passiontide begins today and so begins our journey with Christ to the Cross and then to Easter Day – two weeks away. Two weeks while we experience the worst of this crisis and will probably see much pain, angst and suffering. But two weeks also, until Easter Day when we celebrate new life and hope. We're challenged to go *with* Christ into His suffering at this time, facing pain and death. This year, it is more real than it has ever been. This year we can display that faith and courage that says we can do it and let God take us by the hand, right through to Easter Day – because there will be Easter Day.

Amen