

John 11:1--15;; 20--27;; 31--35;; 38--45

Reader 1: Narrator

Now a certain man fell ill, Lazarus, from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister, Martha. This was the Mary who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother, Lazarus, was ill. So the sisters sent to Jesus, saying:

Congregation:

Lord, the friend you love is ill.

Reader 1:

When Jesus heard it, he said:

Reader 2: Jesus

This illness doesn't end in death, but in the glory of God, so the son of God may be glorified through it.

Reader 1:

Now, Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. Still, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was two days more. Then, after that, he said to his disciples:

Reader 2:

Let's go to Judea again.

Choir or band:

Rabbi, people in Judea want to stone us, and you're taking us there again?

Reader 2:

Aren't there twelve hours of daylight? If people walk in the daylight, they don't stumble because they see the light of this world. But if they go walking at night, they do stumble, because there is no light in them.

(Silence)

Lazarus, our friend, has fallen asleep. But I'm heading there to waken him!

Choir or band:

Lord, if he's asleep, he's going to be safe.

Reader 2:

Lazarus died. And I'm happy for your sake that I wasn't there. This way, you might believe. So, let's go to him!

Readers re--assemble by the pulpit.

Soloist sings "When Jesus Wept" (TFWS 2106)

Reader 1:

When Martha heard that Jesus was arriving, she went to greet him. Mary sat in the house.

Congregation, Right Side:

Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Yet I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you.

Reader 2:

Your brother will rise again.

Congregation, Right Side:

I know he will be raised at the resurrection on the last day.

Reader 2:

I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever entrusts their life to me, even though they should die, yet they will live. And everyone who is alive and entrusts their life to me shall

not die in the age to come. Do you believe this?

Congregation, Right Side:

Yes, Lord. I have believed that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the One who is coming into the world.

Readers move to the Lord's Table.

Reader 1: There were several religious leaders with Mary in the house, comforting her. They saw Mary get up and go out, and they followed her, assuming she was heading to the tomb to bewail there. But when Mary got to where Jesus was, she saw him, and fell at his feet, saying:

Congregation, Left:

Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

Reader 1:

When Jesus saw her bewailing, and the religious leaders who had come with her also bewailing, he groaned in his spirit. He was stirred up.

Reader 2:

Where have you laid him?

Choir or band:

Sir, come and see.

Reader 1:

Jesus teared up and began to weep.

Soloist sings "When Jesus Wept"

Readers move to front and center, floor level.

Reader 1:

So again, groaning inwardly, Jesus goes to the tomb. A cave was there, and a stone lay upon it.

Reader 2:

Lift away the stone.

Reader 1: Martha, sister of the dead man, said to him:

Congregation, Right:

Lord, already he smells bad. It's been four days.

Reader 2:

Did I not say to you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?

Reader 1:

So they lifted away the stone.

And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said:

Reader 2:

Father, I thank you that you have heard me. Indeed, I have always known you hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing around so they might believe you have sent me.

(Loudly shouting): Lazarus, come out!

Reader 1: The dead man came out, bound foot and hand with strips of cloth, and his face was wrapped with a facecloth.

Reader 2:

Unbind him, and let him go his way.

Sermon "Believe!"

I like doing these gospel readings as skits. When I was asking for volunteers to read – and thank you, KC and Karen, for volunteering – I got one additional volunteer, and I asked him to help next week. But as I was reading the parts for today I thought maybe we should have someone play the part of Lazarus – wrap the person up like a mummy. But I think that might have been in bad taste.

Resurrection, believe it or not, is pretty common in the Bible. It happens three times in the Old Testament and six times in the New Testament, not to mention the unknown number of saints that God resurrected at the time of Jesus' death according to the Gospel of Matthew. That being said, we should not think of Lazarus' resurrection as being proof that Jesus is the Son of God, just as we shouldn't think of Jesus' own resurrection as proof that he is Son of God. We may consider them both to be evidence that support our belief that he is the Son of God, but we should not base our belief simply on miracles. That's dangerous, actually, because it can lead folks into worshipping Jesus for the wrong reasons and it can lead people to misunderstand God and lead others into such misunderstanding. If you focus only upon this power of God to heal or resurrect and neglect God's love and grace, we may end up thinking of God as simply a means to our own resurrection, and we can diminish faith into being something like a magic charm that allows us to experience resurrection like Lazarus or like Jesus. That's how shallow some people's faith really is.

That's one reason I'm not terribly fond of creeds, like the Apostle's Creed that all affirmed a few minutes ago. People who look upon God as simply a tool for their own resurrection can think of the Apostle's Creed as the mechanism that makes that tool function. "If I believe what is said in this creed, God will raise me from the dead, too." How simple is that? The Apostle's Creed is simply a theological statement that defines God's nature and prevents the church from splintering in every direction, but it is not the Gospel; the Apostles' Creed talks about *what* God is, but it doesn't say anything about *who* God is. When you look at your spouse or your child, you may think of that person as 65% oxygen, 18% carbon, 10% hydrogen, 3% nitrogen, and 4% "other." That certainly may be true, but that's hardly what you think about that person. And that's the limitation of the Apostle's Creed; it breaks God down into elements. When I look out into the pews, I don't see individual masses of cell systems that are capable of ambulating, reproducing, and communicating. I see Jason, or Carol, or John. I know them as more than protoplasm. I have what is called a *relationship* with them, and so if I were to say that I *believe* in Jason or Carol or John I'm saying something more than Jason and Carol and John exist." And so it is with God. To *believe* in God has something to do with your interaction with God. We have a history with God, a history that the Bible attests to, and a history that our lives attest to. We have a relationship with God.

I like the way Taylor Burton-Edwards, one of our contemporary Methodist theologians, understands belief; it's not so much belief **in** God as belief **into** God. Belief **into** God is something that comes when we know God enough and trust God enough to start acting in ways that show our trust in God. Believing in God means loving God, and Jesus says, "If you love me you will keep my commandments." Miracles don't say anything about love. The Apostles' Creed doesn't say anything about love. But the Gospel message is

all about love, and love is the reason Jesus performs miracles and also the reason that we devise creeds to preserve certain truths about God's nature.

And our Gospel lesson brings that to our attention. Jesus has a relationship with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. A relationship based on love – Martha sends the message to Jesus “the one whom you love is sick.” Love is what prompts Jesus to take a huge risk in going to Judea; his disciples remind him that folks who live in Martha's neighborhood want to stone Jesus, and if they want to stone him before he resurrects Lazarus they want to stone him even more after he resurrects Lazarus; if you read the next nine verses after our Gospel reading you learn that the Jewish leaders starting plotting to kill Jesus as soon as the news of Lazarus' resurrection reaches their ears. If Jesus was a threat to them before this miracle, he's an even greater threat after it. Jesus' love is also on display when Mary mourns the fact that if Jesus had come earlier her brother would still be alive, and Jesus welled up in tears. That's the stuff of a loving relationship, precisely the kind of relationship that God has with us.

Love has to be the key component of our belief. Believing in God's power or anatomy don't do much to inspire us or give us much reason to rejoice. It is God's love that expresses itself in our lives and the promise of a future life that inspires us to love and serve God as we love and serve one another.