

A 5 Lent 2026
Saint Barnabas's Church, Falmouth MA
The Rev David Rider
March 22, 2026

John 11: 1-45

On this Fifth Sunday of Lent, we encounter the most powerful Gospel story this side of Holy Week

Four actors—Martha, Mary, Jesus and Lazarus—live out a powerfully intimate story filled with foreboding, anxiety, death, passion, prayer and transformation like none other

The Lazarus saga comes only in John's Gospel, we know little of their backstory beyond mutual friendship, and we encounter a quirky sense of timing as Jesus waits two days before responding to a pastoral emergency

Jesus returns to Bethany—a place where he nearly was stoned to death at the outset of his ministry—to seek out and heal his mortally ill friend, Lazarus

Upon his arrival, Jesus encounters Martha first, then Mary, each sister chastising Jesus gently in her grief while putting her trust in his presence

Lest we miss the gritty nuance, Martha tells Jesus that Lazarus has been buried for four days

Although Jesus had a plan before encountering the sisters, their stressed-out humanity mixes with his own deep humanity as they experience the full depth of sorrow

For his first time in Scripture, Jesus cries aloud with full human anguish

Then we witness the amazing encounter in which Jesus engages Lazarus with his unique blend of humanity and divinity

Not a time for nuance or subtlety, Jesus shouts with full human pathos—the veins in his throat no doubt throbbing and his eyes bulging from their sockets—Jesus shouts Lazarus from death to new life and human transformation

Unbind Lazarus—and, by extension, unbind you and me—from the shroud of fear and death so that we might experience vibrant life in the presence of God once again

In Jesus, fear and trembling yield to trust and joy even amid the most challenging circumstances of our life

Even more than last Sunday's story of Jesus' spitting in the mud and rubbing it in the blind man's eyes, the raising of Lazarus serves as Jesus' most powerful healing story in Scripture

With palpable irony, it also serves as the segue to Holy Week, the final straw by which the religious authorities lost patience with Jesus.

Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead facilitates his own arrest and eventual crucifixion

Of course, it also serves as premonition for the joy of Easter, now just beyond the horizon

At the outset, I called the Lazarus encounter the most powerful story this side of Holy Week, yet as a 21st century pilgrim, I confess a small dose of frustration

I yearn for a trailer interview or a TED Talk from Lazarus to know how he lived his life once unbound

Did he change his work/life balance?

Did Lazarus spend more time with Martha and Mary?

Did he give back to Bethany in a new and generous way?

Was it quickly business as usual, or did he savor every new moment?

How did he manage his unique burden of preparing for death not once but twice?

Whatever else we say about today's powerful story, we encounter intimacy and deep love, a love that Jesus has for Lazarus, a love that Jesus has for you and me

The great poet George Herbert captures this same mystery in his 17th century ode to divine love:

“Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back, Guilty of dust and sin.”

Whatever ambivalence we have toward love and intimacy, the poem celebrates love's persistence and our soul's yielding to this joyous reality

“You must sit down,” says Love, “and taste my meat.” So I did sit down and eat.”

John’s Gospel suggests that Mary, Martha, Lazarus and Jesus were close friends, perhaps closer than any in the New Testament’s witness

I’m confident that Jesus hung out in Bethany, perhaps as respite, perhaps out of sheer love and concern for his earthly friends

Whether Jesus knew it or not, however, this encounter with Lazarus would be his final visit to Bethany

In the spirit of Herbert’s poem, Jesus lived into the human crisis now enveloping him and, as John puts it, Jesus was deeply moved

As Jesus learns the details of his close friend’s death, Jesus begins to weep, himself the healer now caught up in grief

Someone in the crowd then witnesses Jesus's love for Lazarus that foretells his love for the entire world: “See how Jesus loved him.”

“Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back, guilty of dust and sin.”...”You must sit down, said love, and taste my meat. So I did sit and eat.”

See how Jesus loved him, see how Jesus loves you and me

John is a detailed writer in which each word has multiple nuanced meaning

No word, for John, is incidental or background noise

For John, Jesus and love go hand in hand, as we soon will see most powerfully in Holy Week

John's Gospel employs key words—like love and eternal life—that keep us centered amid the morasse and confusion daily life, so that we might find our way home amid existential crisis and ambiguity

Elsewhere, Jesus cries out that I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly

As Jesus taps his own anguish, he also taps fully into divine force as he encounters Lazarus, breaths in deeply and shouts him from death to renewed life

If Jesus can do that to decrepit Lazarus, imagine what Jesus can do for you and me today.

We may be wobbling at times, getting older and more overwhelmed by a crazy world, but we're still upright and taking nourishment

We may feel dead at times, but Jesus' breathing air into our souls—remisient of God and Adam on the first day of creation—Jesus gives us a second wind with a simple command to do something with it to better this world

This is the joy and mystery that we embrace in Lent and witness in its most powerful mystery in the coming days

The new Lazarus must have been a sight to behold!

Had you been there, would you shed tears of joy or run for the hills?

Jesus cries out perhaps the boldest command of his earthly ministry: "Unbind him, and let him go."

Unbind him, and let him go!

Unbind you and me today, let us go from all the holds us back, from the anxieties and fears that can overwhelm us, from any sense of victimhood that robs us from agency and divine power

In the spirit of Lazarus, I invite you to name anything that binds you and keeps you away from the eternal life that Jesus promises to us in our everyday lives

Jesus shouts to those around Lazarus: Unbind him!

Jesus shouts the same to you and me

Become unbound, throw off the fetters of anxiety or depression

Turn around, taste new life, come and follow Jesus, come and serve the world in his name

As you and I continue walk with Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, I pray that we, too, can be unbound from shroud of anxiety and fear

As we begin to turn the corner from Lent into Holy Week, I invite you to pray or read Scripture as we prepare to walk and watch with Jesus, in full confidence that Christ now walks and watches with us

May God continue to bless us and unbind us from disease, anxiety and fear that we may continue to serve as agile beacons of light, hope and service in this beautiful, challenging, wonderful world