

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

Order of Service (bulletin)

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Video (recorded live stream)

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March 22, 2026

Lent 4

John 11:1-3,11-15,34-35,41-44

There was a certain man named Lazarus, who was sick. He and his sisters, Mary and Martha, were from the village of Bethany. Mary was the one who had anointed the feet of Jesus with perfume and dried his feet with her hair, and it was her brother Lazarus who was sick. The sisters sent this message to Jesus “Rabbi, the one you love is sick.” ... After Jesus said this, he said to the disciples, “Our beloved Lazarus has fallen asleep. I am going to Judea to wake him.” The disciples objected, “But Rabbi, if he's only asleep, he'll be fine.” Jesus had been speaking about Lazarus’ death, but they thought he was talking about actual sleep. So he said very plainly, “Lazarus is dead! For your sakes I am glad that I wasn't there, that you might come to believe. In any event, let's go to him.” ... “Where have you laid him?” Jesus asked [Mary and Martha]. “Come and see,” they said. And Jesus wept. ... So they took the stone away. Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and said, “Abba, thank you for having heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd, that they might believe you that you sent me!” Then Jesus called out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” And Lazarus came out of the tomb, still bound hand and foot with linen strips, his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus told the crowd, “Untie him and let him go free.”



This week, I had the chance to watch the YouTube version of last Sunday's church service at St. David's United Church in Leduc. Now, I was expectedly kind of busy last Sunday in the morning, so I didn't get to go to their service in person, but the wonder of today's recording and making available of our church services meant that I could attend church in the middle of the week. One week ago today, this community of faith where I served as a minister for over 19 years before joining all y'all here at Spirit of Hope (St. David's United Church in Leduc) last week was officially recognized as an Affirming Ministry by Affirm United. My good friend and colleague in ministry, Reverend Leigh Sinclair, preached on the Bible story that Jesus told about a parent who had two children: the third of a series of of stories where Jesus first talked about a shepherd with a hundred sheep and then a woman with 10 coins and then the third and longest story in the series is the parent with two adult children. One of whom demands an early inheritance and then goes off on a wild selfish spending spree.

Leigh began reflecting on this story by saying, "I want to tell you where you are in the parable known as the prodigal son. We are everyone in the parable." And at those words, I actually began to weep - mostly tears of

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joy knowing (first of all) the journey personally that St. Davids went through on their affirming ministry journey. But I also know that the tears that welled in my eyes were a response to emotions that were far more complex than joy. Now, Leigh tells me that this phrasing was inspired by Henri Nouwen. And so, I guess that I'm being inspired today by Nouwen, through my friend Leigh, to tell you that you are everyone in the raising of Lazarus story.

We are Martha and Mary. We are the ones writing to Jesus as they're clinging to hope for a miracle cure. Lazarus has a terminal disease. And they want that miracle cure. We are these sisters who begin to grieve their brother's impending death as many of us do who journey with someone with a slow terminal illness. We begin to grieve before they take their final breath. And I imagine that every once in a while they turn and look and check the road and see if Jesus is getting close. We are Lazarus's siblings here who react with anger and with frustration that Jesus didn't come sooner.

We're also Jesus. We're Jesus who receives the news too late and realizes that he didn't have the opportunity to have one more last visit with his beloved friend or maybe even to be able to help him out. We are Jesus who accepts the honest anger and grief of Mary and Martha. And we are Jesus who brought his own tears to this heartfelt loss.

We're also Lazarus. I mean, we're the person who's in pain, who only gets relief as you drift into an eternity with friends and neighbors at your side.

Were the crowd in Bethany. Now, I did invite Teresa to skip over some of the verses because it's a very long story and I tried to highlight the main pieces, but part of the skipped over verses is the crowd in Bethany who have lots of opinions as to why things are happening the way they are.

And we are definitely Jesus' disciples who sometimes take Jesus too literally and have to be spoonfed the wisdom contained in the metaphor. *Well, if he's asleep, he'll just wake up. – He's dead; that's what I meant.* We all share characteristics with all of the characters in today's reading from John 11. And like each of them, we understand worry. We understand sadness, we understand contentment, we understand desperation, we understand regret, agony, helplessness, hopelessness, heartache and woe. And like everyone in this story, when four day dead Lazarus stumbles out of the tomb, we know what it is to feel overwhelming joy. And we understand that there are things that we just don't understand.

It can be tempting to leap to conclusions about this story, particularly that it's really just a show that Jesus intentionally holds off traveling to Bethany so that Lazarus would already be dead when Jesus gets there. And that Jesus does this intentionally so that Jesus can demonstrate his messianess with the miraculous resurrection. And fair enough. I mean, that's actually how the gospel writer retcons his story. Again, some of the skipped over verses, Jesus saying, *"This illness is for God's glory so that the chosen one can be glorified." Even though Jesus loved the family, after hearing that Lazarus was ill, he still stayed where he was for two more days.*

But when I strip away all of the foreshadowing and the late first century editorial comments about what it all might mean, I hear the bones of the John 11 story this way.

- Mary and Martha send word to their friend Jesus, maybe in writing, maybe with a messenger all the way from Bethany in the south to Capernaum in the north. And the message is that Lazarus is very ill, implying that if Jesus wants one last visit, he should make his way down sooner than later.
- By the time Jesus does get to Bethany, his friend Lazarus is dead and buried.

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- The sisters are deep in the midst of their grief. They are displaying all of the classic Kübler-Ross stages of grief. They are in denial. They are angry. They are bargaining (*if you'd only been here*). They're depressed. And ultimately they accept.
- Jesus visits the grave site and Jesus cries.

An aside A lot of times people say John 11:35 "Jesus Wept" is the shortest verse in the Bible. And that's true if you're reading the King James Version of the Bible. Although in many other English translations, it's actually Job 3:2 that has fewer letters than Jesus wept in English. Some say "Job said" or even shorter, "he said". Then of course if you want to go to the original languages, the Hebrew, the Aramaic, the Greek, it's 1 Chronicles 1:25, that's the shortest. There's only nine letters. I'm not going to try and pronounce it.
- Jesus wept outside of Lazarus's tomb. And then there's the odd request where Jesus asks for the stone to be removed from in front of Lazarus's tomb.

Another aside My absolute favorite King James Version translated verse is in this story. It's John 11:39. In the King James it says, "Martha saith, by this time he stinketh, for he hath been dead four days." I love Bible verses that contain the word stinketh.

Another another aside I suspect that the author of John included the detail that Lazarus had been dead for four days so that later in the gospel when Jesus rises after only three days that Jesus breaks the record. I don't know. That's just my guess.
- And then the conclusion to the story, the stone's been moved aside and Jesus says, "Lazarus, come out of there." And he does.

To make this point that this resurrection of Lazarus was not just a temporary thing, John's gospel says that later (on a different visit to Bethany) when Jesus is having dinner with Mary and Martha, it says that Lazarus was also there. So he's still around. The graveside event wasn't something that just showed up. It didn't rise from the death and then is gone from the story.

I like to read the story this way: that this miraculous resuscitation, this miraculous resurrection, was not a week old plan of Jesus that he concocted and delayed his trip down, but it was an adlib. *I'm here. I'm crying. Wait a second. I feel like there's something I can do.*

And I like to assume that because what I really want is that shortest KJV verse to be genuine and not just performative. I want "Jesus wept" to be honest.

There are a number of psalms in the Hebrew scriptures that are prayer songs of lament. The 130th Psalm begins, "God, out of the depths I cry to you." Last week, the choir sang a musical version of the 23rd Psalm, a text that is most commonly remembered (again) in the King James Version, but the same wording is used in many English translations. *The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.* I wonder if we're open to hearing that slightly differently. *The Lord is my shepherd. That's all I have.*

Sometimes all we have in the moment is the tears. Even reaching as deeply as possible, all that we have is the tears. Now, we want things to be different, but they just aren't. We imagine all the different possible timelines. If I'd have done this, or if this or maybe this will happen in the future, but they aren't real. We're in the moment, and only *the tears of right now* are real.

Now, the gospels don't tell us how Mary and Martha and Lazarus first connected with Jesus. I mean, very likely we can assume that Jesus was on some road trip down to the south down to Judea from his home base in Galilee: something Jesus probably did at least once a year, maybe heading into the Jerusalem area for

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Passover or another major festival. Bethany is only about a kilometer and a half from ancient Jerusalem.

Each of us in our lives, we encounter any number of people on the journey of this life, but there's only a few that turn into lasting relationships. Jesus didn't only meet Mary and Martha and Lazarus in passing, they became friends. How is not something that we're told in the story. Part of the backstory that we can only imagine is that they became friends. This was more than just someone we met along the way. And it wouldn't actually surprise me if maybe it turned out that when Jesus did make some of those visits down to Jerusalem that he took advantage of the fact he had friends nearby. Maybe that's where he stayed. It's only a short walk from Bethany to Jerusalem.

And so when word of Lazarus's illness finally reaches Jesus, when the messenger comes or when the note arrives, Jesus is on his way south within days. John 11:35 - Jesus wept. I hear that verse as tears borne out of deep connection. Those tears flowed out of the depth of their relationship. And still, as the Canadian musical community's response to the Ethiopian famine in the early 80s, *Tears are not enough*.

A metaphor that I see behind John 11 is that the tears are followed up by breathing new life into a situation that was there because of the tears. Now, there's many times and places right now in our societies and in our communities where this kind of resuscitation is needed. I could list off the examples, but you know where fresh breath is needed. There are people who are forced to subsist only on their tears that they are forced to live on the edges of apathy and oppression. And it's out of those depths that new breath is needed. And so we, as church, as people of faith – we preach, we advocate on a big scale. We hope to evolve public policy and public opinion to transform tears into the breath of new life. And yet, like Jesus, we know that the real impact is in the small one-on-one, few-on-few connections, those relational situations where resuscitation really makes a difference.

St. David in Leduc, like Spirit of Hope here in Edmonton, has committed itself to lifegiving inclusion and welcome and involvement as a formal Affirming Ministry. In Ezekiel's story (that I shared earlier during the learning time)... it is a fun fact that in Hebrew, the word for *spirit* is the same word as *breath* as the same word as *wind*. And it's also true in the Greek of the New Testament. Breath and spirit are intertwined.

So may God's spirit blow us out of the depths of despair. May God's spirit wipe away our honest tears and give us the ability to breathe new life into ourselves and our communities. Amen.

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