

John 11:1-45: Stories That Matter / Lazarus

There's a journalist named Steve Hartman who has made a career out of telling what he calls "*On the Road*" stories. If you've ever seen one, you know they're not about celebrities or breaking news. They're about ordinary people.

A man who builds tiny libraries for kids who can't afford books.

A community that rallies around a grieving neighbor without being asked.

A child who starts a kindness movement that spreads far beyond their small town.

They're the kinds of stories that don't usually make headlines...and yet, somehow, they're the ones that stay with you. Recently, he was recognized with another Emmy for this work –not because the stories are flashy, but because they are *faithful*. Faithful to something we're all hungry for: the reminder that goodness is still happening...that people still show up for one another...that even in a fractured world, something whole is still breaking through.

And what's striking is that these stories don't ignore pain. Almost every single one begins in the same place: loss... disappointment... grief... something that has gone wrong. But then, somewhere along the way, something unexpected happens.

Not a reversal that erases the pain, but a moment that interrupts it. A small act. A surprising connection. A flicker of life where no one thought to look. And when you watch closely, you realize: these aren't just nice stories. They're resurrection stories.

Not the kind with trumpets and fireworks but the quiet kind. The kind that happens in nursing homes and neighborhoods, in phone calls and casseroles, in people choosing, again and again, to show up for each other.

Which makes me wonder... If someone like Steve Hartman is traveling the country, finding these small resurrections hidden in plain sight, what might we notice if we started looking for them, too?

Because long before there was a camera crew or an inspiring closing segment on the evening news, there was a story about a man named Lazarus.

A story that also begins in grief. In loss that feels final. In people saying, "*It's too late now*."

And yet...it becomes the kind of story people tell and retell because something happens that no one expected: Not just comfort. Not just presence. But life in a place where there should have only been endings.

In the middle of a world that feels heavy where headlines are full of loss, division, and grief...Steve Hartmann pauses... and tells a different kind of story. Not flashy. Not cynical. Just... human.

Small stories. Easy to miss.

But when you hear them (or watch them), something in you shifts.

Because they remind us:

Not everything is lost.

Not everything is broken beyond repair.

There is still life... still goodness... still something rising.

And maybe that's why we need those stories—
because we are also people who know grief.

And we know grief don't we? In our personal lives, in our professional lives.

Stuff Happens...Am I right? It's not all sunshine and rainbows.

Things got royally mixed up at work.

The Doctor's can't figure out what is going on with your kid...

You had to have conflict with someone you love.

You lost a friend or family member to the politics in recent months.

The people in your life require more care than ever

You yourself require more care than ever!

A friend is in a hard season and you just don't know how to support them.

Grief is complicated...and also a real part of our day to day

Quite simply, we do not have to dig very deep to come up with examples of when hard things happen. Events in which we wish we could just raise a magic wand and change the narrative. Events that are so disrupting we question our grounded-ness in our own reality.

So If I am being honest, and I can't help but be honest: I have a love/(dislike) relationship with this scripture passage. If I am being super honest I have that relationship with a lot of scripture passages. In this instance,

I blame those years as a hospital chaplain sitting at the bedside of patients who did not get their miracle, did not get more time. Resurrection stories can sometimes feel less accessible (but hang with me as this story has much to tell us). As it speaks to the good

with the hard. The beauty in the pain and those sacred moments where we as people have no choice but to lean on one another to make it though.

Basically, every individual in our story today is hurting in some way, and that part is so relatable. So I want to invite us to take a moment, to consider how it is you might be showing up to this space today and give yourself permission to simply be here. Hard things and all... heaviness of the world and all. Grief and all.

This year I have had the privilege of getting to know and spend time with our Middle Schoolers on Wednesday Nights (they keep me working). And, thanks to the wisdom of the adults in the room we take some time each night to transition to being present here and now. There is an invitation to let the day at school be what it was and to kind of shed those layers or the masks required to endure in those spaces for any length of time with the intent of meeting each other here, in this space, in order to show up and connect around what it means to be community, disciples/followers and learners of Jesus.

So I too, give you permission to find yourself in our story today. Who, in this story might you identify with most?

Is it **Lazarus**? I trust that at some point we have perhaps found ourselves in a “cave.” Cut off from all others. And I trust that cave, be it depression, illness, a separation, a job loss, felt isolating and lonely with little hope for resurrection. In this story we see Lazarus facing illness, facing unknown. Tired, weak, wore out, lifeless?

Jesus, at the time of this story was in Jerusalem for the festival of dedication. He and his disciples had narrowly escaped an attempt at his life that was intended to harm him/ stone him and narrowly escaped an arrest. He, I imagine is under much pressure to perform, to say the right thing and to not loose hope while day after day facing adversity. Have you recently dogged or delayed something difficult? Are you presently desiring safety from a hard thing that feels quite vulnerable. Perhaps you are experiencing a lot of pressure from those around you to do, be and perform?

Are you like **Martha and Mary** who are at the bedside of their ill brother. Fearful and grieving that he might soon leave them. Are you in the role of caregiver? Are you someone whose current role is holding your family together. Are you yearning for a friend that feels too far way?

Pain.. Hope

Fear.. Beauty

Longing.. Confidence

”It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” I am quoting the opening line of Charles Dickens' 1859 novel A Tale of Two Cities. A story of duality, contrasting luxury and hope with the poverty and despair in London and Paris during the French Revolution. And that circles back to the love dislike of how amidst the hardest things there is often beauty. This dissonance.

Thankfully, these events, these painful and beautiful defining moments don't happen all that often because when they do, they sure ask a lot of us. We can probably all pull examples from our own lives and world in which we have sat in this space. Many of you who submitted stories for our “*Stories that Matter Booklet*,” do just that, give examples of how some of our, “worst of times,” moments can often be accompanied by some of the best and sweetest moments of growth, hope and connection.

The Lazarus story. It is a story about death, but it is also a story about life. Yes, it is a story of grief but also a story about hope. A story about doubt and a story about faith. A story that challenges our limited thinking to have a God sized vision for our lives and world.

First and foremost it is a story about love. Love between siblings: Mary, Martha and Lazarus and love between friends. There are several examples of their closeness as we explore this story further:

It begins with the women summoning for Jesus to come save their brother. Jesus receives the message and is unable to respond in a timely fashion. We are talking...days. Now this isn't so far fetched. We have all reached out for help and when it works and is timely that is excellent, but more often that not we ask things of the people in our lives, and they can't just drop everything and show up in the exact moment we need them. Sometimes their help comes at different times and in different ways than we might desire, imagine or expect.

But after a few days Jesus does respond to Mary and Martha's request and makes it to Bethany, but in the time it took Jesus to arrive, Lazarus has already been dead for four days. Four days is significant in the Jewish tradition in so much as the soul is believed to return to the body for up to three days, so four becomes very significant in the sense that Lazarus at this point is for sure dead prior to Jesus's arrival. Or in Wizard of Oz terms “positively, absolutely, undeniably dead.”

The friends meet up at the tomb of Lazarus, and here is where we know Martha and Jesus have a close relationship and that Jesus feels a strong connection to this group of siblings. Because here, and in most translations of this text it describes Jesus as weeping alongside them outside of the tomb.

Another way we can gauge the closeness of their friendship (and I love this part) is in how Martha offers Jesus some feedback. The loving sometimes sharp sounding unsolicited advice we are quick to give our friends. Voicing, *“if you had come sooner my brother wouldn’t have died.”* Jesus responds much like many people of faith might respond to a friend, offering words of assurance about the afterlife, stating that *“Lazarus will live again with God.”* Jesus tells her that Lazarus will rise again.

Now to paraphrase Martha’s response I think it might go something like, *“Yes Jesus, I know he is with God and that he will live with God there, but dude, I’m grieving here.” This is really hard. Can I just be angry? This is all still really new to me. Great about the rising again stuff, but I want him here...now.”*

And I do think Jesus gets it, but he also has a bigger lens here because he is well, the son of God.

I admire Martha. She is not stepping out of her integrity, she is not leaving the relationship with Jesus. She is making her disappointment known and perhaps “clapping back,” at her friend Jesus. Again leaning into the relationship. And despite this push back she is still professing a profound faith in God who hears and answers prayers.

But Jesus leans in and says... *“Martha, Martha listen, I know you have faith in God. Believe in me also. Hear this.. I am the resurrection and the life.”*

Jesus , says *“do you not remember my words? If you believe, you will see the Glory of God.”*

And then the wonder happens....

Now just a reminder. Lazarus, he dead. In the tomb. The sisters have already made comments that they can smell him from where they are standing. Nobody should be opening this tomb and certainly nobody should be going near Lazarus and touching him. It would be terribly unclean to do so.

But the wonder... They took away the stone and Jesus shares his gratitude and confidence that God always hears him (he’s a little show boaty here (*we are all a little guilty of that*)).

And then says, “Lazarus Come Out!” I don’t know if he yelled it... if he knocked on the side of the cave. If it came as a whisper but Jesus called for Lazarus to come out.

Now I alluded to our own unique caves earlier. The things and times and situations where we have felt alone or isolated. Disconnected from the joys and hopes of life. And what do we have to do? Get our selves up and on out of those moments. We, like Lazarus all have a role to play in our own healing don’t we?

And then once Lazarus gets himself out of the cave, Jesus does something crazy (Don’t we love it when Jesus does something crazy). He tells the people gathered around to “*remove the cloth,*” to “*unwrap him.*” Lazarus has to get himself out, but the community has to unwrap/unbind him and let him go. If it was death (we have ourselves yet another resurrections story that foreshadows that of Jesus). But whatever it was that separated him/ whatever removed him.... the goal of Jesus is to pull him back into community.

Just like I had to phone a friend for help with this sermon the community exists to unbind us (even if it’s from writers block).

Just like when stranded on the side of the highway on my way home, a friend says yes and shows up with snacks and a plan to entertain the kids while we wait for a stranger to assist in getting us back on the road. The community shows up and unwraps us.

When we work up the courage to do the hard thing, to leave the unhealthy relationship, to mend, to be brave. We walk on trusting in the community that unwraps us.

Francis Weller writes, “Grief is a solitary journey we cannot do alone.” When we separate ourselves from community it can feel a bit like death. How do we muster trust and hope in moments of uncertainty? How do we cultivate a Jesus lens that can imagine a world far different from our own?

Perhaps it is through this promise of a resurrection we inherit through Jesus? A promise that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. That part of our scripture text that we often hear in the context of funerals. **Absolutely! And** we get this here and now life. This present beautiful disaster of a life now filled with hopes and dreams, lavish things and also challenges.

The invitation here is not necessarily one to unpack the miracle, but to believe in the power of relationships. To know and love Jesus in a way that feels authentic. That allows

you to ask big questions like: “Hey Jesus, Where you been?” “What took you so long.” To see and understand the ways God is ever present alongside us, weeping beside the caves we find ourselves in. The hope is that we too come to Jesus with the hard things... and may we do so knowing he is constantly calling us back into community. Back into belonging.

Maybe the story of Lazarus isn't as far removed from our world as we think.

Maybe it's not just a miracle to believe in but a way of seeing.

A way of noticing that even now, even here!

God is still telling *On the Road* stories of resurrection.

And may we experience them here and now.