



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent V

[RCL] Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

When Jesus Shows Up

Jesus has a lot of nerve showing up to town in this morning's Gospel reading.

The story begins days earlier, when Lazarus becomes seriously ill. His sisters, Martha and Mary, send word to Jesus, trusting that he will come. The Gospel of John makes it clear that these three siblings are not strangers to Jesus. They are beloved friends. Their home in Bethany is a place of welcome and rest for him, a place where he can step away from crowds and demands. It is a place where he is known not simply as a teacher or healer, but as a friend. John shows plainly that Jesus loves Lazarus, and that he loves Martha and Mary as well.

Because of that love, the sisters expect Jesus to come immediately. They have seen what he can do. They have watched him heal people he has never met before—people who approach him desperate, hopeful, and full of need. Surely, they think, he will come quickly for someone so dear to him. Surely, he will heal their brother, and life will return to normal. Surely, this will end the way so many other stories have ended, with relief, gratitude, and another reason to trust.

But Jesus does not come right away.

When he receives the message that Lazarus is ill, Jesus stays where he is for two more days. The delay is striking, and the gospel does not explain it away. By the time Jesus finally begins the journey to Bethany, the situation has changed entirely. What was once an urgent illness has become a death. Lazarus has been buried. When Jesus arrives, Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days.

Four days is long enough for grief to settle in. Long enough for mourners to arrive from nearby Jerusalem. Long enough for shock to give way to sorrow, and for sorrow to harden into anger. Martha goes out to meet Jesus first, and Mary follows later, but both say the same thing: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

It is a statement filled with grief, but also with accusation. It speaks the pain of trust disappointed. It names the question that so often rises in moments of loss: Why did help not come sooner? Why did God not act in time? Why was healing offered to others, but withheld here?

Even the crowd echoes this question. Some of them say, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” The implication is unmistakable. Jesus had power. Jesus had opportunity. And yet, Jesus did not arrive in time.

By the time Jesus reaches Bethany, it seems as though everything that could have gone wrong already has. The crisis is over. The worst has happened. Nothing remains but grief, anger, and a sealed tomb. Whatever Jesus might have done, it appears the moment for action has passed. The story feels finished.

And then Jesus says something unexpected. Speaking to Martha, he says, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha responds with what sounds like faithful resignation. She speaks of the resurrection on the last day. She affirms her belief in God’s promises for the future. It is a correct answer, a theologically sound response. And yet beneath her words is distance. Resurrection at the end of time offers little comfort when the pain is immediate and raw. Hope deferred can sound hollow when loss is fresh and the wound is still open.

Jesus responds by shifting the conversation entirely. He says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.”

Jesus does not say that resurrection is something that will happen someday. He does not point only toward the future. He says that resurrection is present now.

Resurrection is not simply an event at the end of time; it is bound up in the very presence of Jesus. Where Jesus is, life is already pressing in on death.

The story pauses here, but it does not rush past grief. When Jesus comes to the tomb and sees the sorrow of those gathered, he weeps. This moment matters. The Gospel does not present a Savior who stands above human pain or explains it away. Jesus does not hurry past grief on his way to a miracle. Jesus enters it fully. He stands before the reality of death and shares in the tears of those who mourn.

Only then does Jesus act.

Standing before the tomb, Jesus calls out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” And Lazarus emerges—still wrapped in burial cloths, still bearing the marks of death. Jesus then turns to those standing nearby and says, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

The miracle is not only that Lazarus is raised. It is also that the community is drawn into the work of restoration. The bindings of death must be removed. Life, once given, must be set free. Resurrection is not only something received; it is something lived into, together.

This story from John’s Gospel is not about one man brought back to life long ago. It reveals something essential about the character of God. It shows a God who enters places that seem beyond repair. A God who arrives not before pain, but in the midst of it. A God who does not wait for the moment to be safe, convenient, or understandable.

Friends in Christ, Jesus is the one who shows up when it is too late. When it is *far* too late. Jesus is the one who arrives *after* the nick of time has passed—after the eleventh hour has come and gone. Jesus comes

when the flame of hope has flickered and gone out, when everything seems lost and the world has fallen apart.

Jesus shows up when there are no more treatment options. When the bottom has dropped out and there is nowhere left to fall. When the end of the rope has been reached and let go. Jesus shows up when everyone else has given up. When all that can be seen and smelled is death. When all that is left is a tomb, tears, grief, anger, and disappointment.

That is when Jesus shows up.

Christian tradition has held onto this truth through an ancient Easter image known as the harrowing of hell. Drawing on the traditional teaching that Jesus descended to the dead, this image shows the risen Christ breaking into the depths, shattering chains and instruments of captivity, and pulling people out—every last one of them. Even those who believed it was too late. Those who assumed they were beyond saving.

In this image, hell is emptied, and death itself is undone.

This is the same Jesus who stands before the tomb of Lazarus and calls him out. The same Jesus who enters places marked by decay and despair and speaks life into them. The same Jesus who commands that the bindings of death be removed and that the one brought back to life be set free.

There is no time too late for Jesus. No place beyond reach. No situation beyond redemption. There is no one to whom Jesus cannot say, “You will rise again.” No one who cannot be called out of death into life. No one who cannot be unbound and set free.

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