

## **IN THE ARMS OF MORPHEUS**

### **Cooke's-Portsmouth Church**

#### **John 11:1-45**

It is not easy to preach from such a long storied text. John 11 is deeply theological; arguably it dances on the thin ice of impossibility and it includes a gamut of human emotion. It begins in hope as the two sisters Mary and Martha send word to Jesus of their brother's illness. In faith they believed that Jesus would come and heal him. There is the lack of understanding of the disciples when the use of the word sleep is used to suggest both physical rest and eternal rest. There is the devastating disappointment in Jesus expressed by both sisters at different times: If you had been here death could have been averted. The inference drawn is that this tragic loss was his fault.

There is the seesawing of emotion on the lips of fellow mourners in response to the tears of Jesus: some saw the tears as evidence of deep love and expressed grief. Others saw the tears as too little late: surely one who had the power to restore sight could have; should have done something to avert this loss. There is the drama of removing a stone and fears of the odour of decomposing flesh emanating from the tomb and the final command of Jesus to unbind the man and set him free from the grip of death.

Hope for a cure. Disappointment when a cure was not forthcoming. Someone to blame. Are not these the things yet and still associated with death, grief and loss? The disappointment on the lips of both Mary and Martha the same expressed disappointment from the lips of generations of grief stricken people: If you had been here; if you had intervened this could have been avoided.

I remember a time on my ordinand charge when I was called to the home of people who had just been informed that their son had been killed in a motor vehicle accident in Alberta. The young man, his brother in law and another young man had come off of a twelve hour night shift and gotten into their truck to drive to the home of a fellow labourer who lived in the next town and who had just become a father. The men spent the day drinking alcohol without having gotten any sleep and ran off the road on the return trip to camp later. The parents were devastated that their son had been killed and their son in law seriously hurt. When I asked if they would like me to pray, the parents and siblings all said “No! Where was God on that road? Why did God not prevent the accident from happening?” They bolted in tears from the room and I let myself out of the house, wondering what I should have done differently. Should the one who opened the eyes of the blind have taken the wheel of the truck from an intoxicated and sleep deprived driver? Should the one who commanded Lazarus to come forth from the tomb have breathed life into the nostrils of one impaired by alcohol and lacking good judgement?

The raising of Lazarus is the final sign story before Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem and his own demise and death. Fred Craddock has explained John’s use of the sign story as having two functions. A sign story consists of a miraculous act of Jesus usually surrounded or followed by a theological discussion of its meaning. Such is John’s presentation of Jesus turning water to wine, healing a cripple at the pool, feeding the multitudes, giving sight to a man born blind and raising Lazarus. At least two features mark sign stories. First, Jesus acts according to his own time and not according to external pressures. For example, Jesus separates himself from his mother (2:4) before acting at the wedding feast at Cana. The reader should not, then, be disturbed by Jesus’ response to the urgent message about Lazarus’s illness (11:3-6) : Jesus stayed two days longer where he was. In this Gospel, Jesus’ actions are "from above." Second, to say this is a sign story

is to say that its primary function is revelation. Some truth about the meaning of God's glory and presence in the world is made known through Jesus' ministry. For the stories to function this way, they must be seen to operate on two levels. On one level Jesus heals a cripple, opens the eyes of the blind or raises the dead, but on another level he reveals a truth about life eternal which God makes available in Jesus Christ.

This is not simply the incredible and emotional story of a family in crisis in Bethany but the crisis of the world; not only the raising of a dead man but the giving of life to the world. On one level the story is about the death and resurrection of Lazarus, but on another it is about the death and resurrection of Jesus. The sisters want their brother back, to be sure, but Jesus is also acting to give life to the world... Jesus declares this truth to Martha at the heart of the narrative: "I am the resurrection and the life."

With these two meanings in mind, the passion of Jesus bleeds through the surface of the story. Jesus was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled and he wept (v. 35). The crowd said, "See how he loved him!" but in this Gospel the crowd never fully understand what is really going on. Jesus is experiencing something like a Gethsemane, for he knows that calling Lazarus out of the tomb means that he must enter it. The narrative will shortly make that fact abundantly clear: the belief in Jesus generated by his raising Lazarus prompts the religious leaders to plot Jesus' death. For Jesus there is no other way because only in this act can he be the resurrection and the life for the world.

Jesus is setting his face towards Jerusalem; giving those who desire his life the ammunition they need to accuse, arrest try and execute and Jesus continues to walk towards that inevitability so that he can be the resurrection and the life for more than just a grief stricken family in Bethany.

Jesus wept in grief and pity but he wept in the fullness of his humanity as he contemplated his destiny.

Book Club read *The Reason You Walk in March* by Anishinaabe First Nation chief, Wab Kinew. He tells the story of the life and death of his father, a survivor of the residential school system and a person of great strength, faith and integrity. I read the passage that I am about to share on Monday of this week following the funeral for my dad. The words verily leapt off the page as I considered their strength, compassion and inevitability for all. It is also very Christological and the raising of Lazarus and the sacrifice of the only born Son merged together in a dance of intimacy. He wrote:

Over the previous month, as this moment came hurtling closer and my father walked steadily towards it we watched him stripped down to his base level of humanity. To our common denominator. To face our universal destiny.

He did not look for a way out. He did not cheat. He walked toward it as he walked toward all things, with courage, strength and grace. We had witnessed what Soren Kierkegaard called a leveling process. The divisions we obsess over-money, politics, race-were stripped away first. They did not matter in the end. Then the traveling was taken away, followed by independence of the individual the ego. They did not matter either.

Then you got down to water mattered

Food.

But then you can't eat.

Water

But then you can't drink

Air.

But then you stop breathing. Finally all he had left was the final resource that all of us will exhaust-time.

But then his time was up.

And then he was gone

What's left behind?

All that remains in the end is the love.

The love he had for us

The love we still have for him.

And true love never dies.

I titled this reflection in the arms of Morpheus which is a fancy way of saying sleeping and a reference to the double entendre of sleeping in the text. It refers both to physical rest and the eternal rest of death. On this Sunday before Palm Sunday and Holy week we consider the death and raising of Lazarus as foreshadow of the death and raising of Jesus. On another day another Mary will be weeping by a garden tomb, a stone will be rolled away. On that day the burial cloths will be left behind in the tomb. Today the burial cloths still cling to Lazarus and need to be removed by human hands: a reminder that death still clings to him. On another day the cloths will be folded and left behind-no longer required for the one whom God has raised. At the tomb of Lazarus death is denied for a time. On another day death will be overcome for good. On that day the disciples will see a sign even greater than the raising of Lazarus. Here, at the tomb of

Lazarus, death is denied for a time. There, at the tomb of Jesus, death will be overcome for good by the one who is the resurrection and the life. Thanks be to God. Amen.