

SERMON – 29 MARCH 2020 – EZEKIEL 37.1-14, JOHN 11.1-45

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Here we are, two weeks before Easter, and they give us this amazing story – a forerunner of what we will be celebrating two weeks today (and we will be celebrating it, even if we won't be celebrating it together in our churches). In real time, we are probably a few months, not more than a year or so, before Jesus' death and resurrection.

Jesus has had a close relationship with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. They are his friends. We assume it is the same Martha and Mary that he has dinner with on another occasion. It's the Mary who anoints Jesus' feet with oil – that's quite an intimate thing to do. This is a close friendship.

We've all had this sort of message – those days the phone rings, and there's someone you're not expecting on the other end. Someone's ill, someone's dead - and our heart goes out to people who, today, are waiting for that call. Hannah said one of the hardest things she has had to do this last week is tell her patients and their families that they cannot be together, even when death is imminent. Many medical staff are having to be the ones who make the phone calls, the calls that people are dreading - and so many people cannot be where they want to be. This is as bad as it gets - all we can do is pray, and love, and be there well into the future when people are still trying to grieve.

When we get news of death, we don't make the response that Jesus made, "This illness does not lead to death, rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Did Jesus know how this was going to end? – it reads like that. I will wait here, wait for two days. He was so certain, no doubts in his mind – I find it uncomfortable reading, I want him to go to his friends. Mary and Martha were waiting for him, what would they be feeling? I wonder what the other disciples thought – did they want to get to their friends, or were they so afraid of going to Judea, they really didn't want to go there. We forget that Jesus was a marked man, there were people who wanted rid of him. He has faith, he has certainty, he knows he is the light – he is not worried.

Lazarus has fallen asleep – well that's OK, he's on the mend – no, he has died. I learned a long time ago not to use euphemisms. Many years ago I gave thanks in prayers that someone had "gone home". I meant she had gone home from hospital, that was not what my congregation heard. Lot of explaining to do afterwards! Jesus makes it abundantly clear he knows Lazarus is dead – I wonder if the disciples asked themselves how he knew, or just accepted that he did. "I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe".

Thomas is the brave one – yes, Thomas, the one we call doubting Thomas. I was ordained on St Thomas' day and you know that I have a very soft spot for doubting Thomas. He has the faith to say we will go – even if death is a possibility. That is bravery, and the others go too. We often comment that the disciples don't stand up well in a crisis, that they desert Jesus in his last few hours – but here, these are his friends, they will go with him, into danger, and into a house of death. They may be wondering why Jesus hadn't gone back earlier, they may be angry that Jesus hadn't gone back earlier, but they will go with him. It sounds to have been a journey that took a day or two, and I wonder what the atmosphere was like as they walked together. Probably quite tense – quite a difficult few days.

When they get to the village, to the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, the atmosphere is still tense. Lazarus has been buried, but the mourning continues. Not like our culture, in normal times we get the bunfight over same day, then back to normal. It sounds as if Lazarus was quite an influential person, Jews had come from Jerusalem, and there is a house full of professional mourners. It almost sounds like something out of "Life of Brian" – but actually it is serious.

Martha goes out to meet him, she needs space – needs space to confront Jesus. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died". That's not the way to greet a friend – "but even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him". I wonder if that's what she's hanging on to. I don't think she'll be expecting Jesus to bring him back to life, after all she knows death is death – but she believes there will be a resurrection on the last day.

Lots has been written about what Jews of the Jesus' time thought would happen after death – most humans have some sort of belief that death is not the end, that there will be something, and if Martha had talked with Jesus in the past – and I can quite picture her, her sister, her brother, Jesus and some of the disciples sat round in their kitchen with a glass in their hands, discussing matters of life and death.

"I am the resurrection, and I am the life" Jesus assures her. I use that sentence so often, and I often wonder what people make of it. Is it a certainty they are happy with, or is it something they are hanging on to? I ask myself what I make of it, when I've heard those words used over people I love. I'd love to say it was a certainty, but I'm only human and death hurts. "Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" – yes, that's what I hang on to.

Martha has certainty in Jesus, she knows who he is, he is the Messiah, the Son of God. I can imagine her, looking straight at Jesus, and knowing he is who he says he is.

She goes and gets Mary – “The Teacher is here and he is calling for you”. Jesus is not just a friend, he is more than that – this is a special relationship. Mary comes to Jesus, and kneels in front of him – yes, he is more than a friend. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” That gets to Jesus, so many people in tears, is it his fault? They take him to see where Lazarus is buried, everyone is upset, and Jesus ends up in tears as well. This is a human Jesus, as well as a divine Jesus – although I would suggest that God can cry as well. Some realise how much he loved Lazarus, others were more critical.

Jesus is greatly disturbed – did he know what was coming, was he questioning whether he would be able to bring Lazarus back, did he realise the pressure he was under? “Take away the stone” – and Martha is so practical, we don’t want to think what a body would smell like after four days in the tomb. I wonder if Jesus rounds on her - “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

Jesus looks to God, Jesus prays, Jesus acts – Lazarus comes out. I wonder what Lazarus made of being bought back to life? “Unbind him and let him go”.

Many of the Jews believed, no doubt others were even angrier by what they had seen. Then, a year or so later, when Jesus died, and was laid in a tomb for three days – and came out alive, did they believe then?

What about us? We struggle to believe in a story like this. Do we believe that he was really dead? Do we believe that Jesus could really bring Lazarus back to life?

If we do, like Martha and Mary we have to believe he is more than just a human being. No human being can bring another one back to life. If he is the Messiah, the Son of God, what does that mean for us? Do we worship Sunday by Sunday simply because that’s what we’ve always done – or do we worship because he is our Saviour and our Lord? Can we hold on to our faith when we can’t worship Sunday by Sunday, when our building, our friends, when they are not what holds us together?

That is a challenge, a challenge for all of us (including your Vicar) – a challenge we meet in the strength of our Easter faith.

Peter Barham, 27 March 2020

