

The last few weeks have been pretty strange. Everything seems to be backward and upside-down.

So many of our usual things and activities have changed. All of this is because of the corona virus, and the precautions we must take to deal with it. I, for one, am needing something different. I am needing hope and life.

Well, as it turns out, the Scripture lesson today, from the Gospel of John is full of hope and life! And no, I didn't choose this one—it is the one scheduled for today! How about that?

In this episode from Jesus' life, he gives life to his good friend Lazarus, who had been dead and buried for four days. It was a miracle.

This may be Jesus' most personal miracle, if you think about it. Jesus had healed many people. He had fed thousands with small amounts of food. He had raised two other people from the dead. There had been so many miracles.

But this time, he knew the man Lazarus. Jesus was very good friends with Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. Jesus had visited their home frequently. He had even settled a situation for Martha and Mary.

This was not a matter of healing a stranger who had just come to him, or whom Jesus happened to notice. This was a friendship.

Maybe that is what accounts for that one verse, “Jesus wept.” Yes, yes, yes, that is the very shortest Bible verse, which is why everyone knows it, (even though I read from a different version of the Bible.) However, the verse is within this story, and this story is about a man Jesus knew, who had died. Jesus wept; his friend had died.

It was kind of a difficult situation, because Jesus and his disciples were not in that town, Bethany, when the message came that Lazarus was deathly ill, maybe even deathly dying, in Bethany.

Going to Bethany, a town in Judea, would mean being closer to Jerusalem, where Jesus was getting serious threats from the religious leaders.

Here is how the disciples considered it all. (Story by Phyllis Williams Provost, Storyteller's Companion to the Bible, John, volume 10)

Getting stoned is something you never want to do—especially if you're on the wrong end of the stones. Well, there were some folks in Judea who wanted Jesus to be on the wrong end of those stones. Word was going around that he had said, "The Father and I are one." Now someone could have called him a magician, a mystic, or even a demon, and someone in the crowd would have slapped someone else on the back and said, "See there, Harvey, I told you so! You owe me five bucks." But calling himself *God!* This was *blasphemy!*

The people had all been pestering him to tell them who he was—"Come on, Jesus! Who are you really? Are you like David Copperfield or something? I bet you're the Messiah! Tell us you're the Messiah! Come on! Admit it! You're the Messiah, aren't you? Who are you?"

"I'm the Messiah."

"Are not!" "I can't believe he said that!" "The nerve of him!" "What made him say that?"

And Jesus went on an instant retreat—to the other side of the Jordan—just before they got out the tar, feathers, and rocks.

They had been in Perea only a short while when the message came from Bethany. His friend, Lazarus, was sick—really sick—and Lazarus's sisters, Mary and Martha, had sent [word to let Jesus know.]

When he heard the message, Jesus sat down on the sand, his head in his hands. Finally, he said, "He won't die. We stay here." And so they did. The disciples thought that was the end of the matter. But then, two days later at breakfast, Jesus announced, "We're going to Judea."

"Uh, excuse me," Peter interrupted. "Do the words, 'Stone the blasphemer' mean anything to you? Don't you remember what happened the last time we were in Judea? Wouldn't a trip to the Mediterranean work just as well?"

Jesus explained. "We're going back because Lazarus is asleep."

"Right, Jesus, a lot of people are asleep at this hour."

Sometimes Jesus must have felt like his disciples had all the insight of a rutabaga, but he tried again.

“Lazarus is dead.”

They got it.

“And so now we’ve got to go there.”

They didn’t get it. Maybe Jesus needed to do the funeral.

The silence was broken by Thomas. “Let’s go die with Jesus when he goes!”

You can’t say that he was lacking for support.

When they arrived in Bethany, they found that Lazarus had been there in the tomb for about four days, and all his friends and kinfolk were really upset. Martha met him at the gate. “Where *were* you?” she demanded. “If you’d have been here, he wouldn’t have died.”

Jesus said to her, “I was with you—and I am with you now.”

And then . . . Jesus wept.

They went to the tomb together.

Now, tombs in those days were usually caves cut into the limestone hillside. And this particular cave already had several people placed in it. A big rock had been rolled in place in front to seal it.

When they got there, Jesus stood right in front of the tomb. He drew himself up to full height and commanded, “Remove the stone!”

What was he going to do? Was Jesus planning on going inside? Two of the disciples moved the rock—and held their breath in anticipation.

Jesus raised his arms toward heaven . . . and prayed. And then, in a loud voice, he commanded, “Come *out*!” Who or what did he think was going to emerge from that tomb? A skeleton? A ghost?

The dank air of the tomb slowly hissed from the hillside. The breeze suddenly stilled as a form walked from the dark cave. Jesus turned to them and said, “Go unbind him!” It was Lazarus! He was alive!

From that point on, people began to recognize that Jesus was more than a holy man—he could give life to *everyone*!

But some were more attuned to death than life, and from that moment on, they began to plot the death of Jesus.

Now it seems to me that this story offers Christians hope, and it offers us life.

Mary and Martha had a great deal of hope. They knew that Jesus could do something for their brother. They both knew that Jesus could help Lazarus when he was sick; and they both knew that Jesus could help Lazarus even when he had died. All they had to do was let Jesus know, which they did.

They didn't tell Jesus to come, or come right away, even though they might have expected it. Still, they knew that the thing to do was to let Jesus know.

We need to do that, too, in our prayers. We need to pray to the Lord and hand him our problems and situations, and go ahead and ask for his help. We need to be considering Jesus as our good friend, our friend who cares, our friend who cries with us when we cry. All of that is a way of having faith and hope. It is how Christians are to deal with our difficulties.

The wonderful part of this story is that Lazarus was restored to life. The verses have Jesus accomplishing this with his words, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus did, alive again.

There is a different thing which I thought of, and I hope that it makes sense. It seems to me that Jesus is just full of life. Jesus had life at his disposal and is willing to give it to us.

What we ourselves have experienced is, of course, life here on earth. That is what Lazarus got back, in this miracle. We love this kind of life. It is great. We are cherishing it more every day.

There is also life on the other side of the grave, heaven itself. That is eternal and beautiful and perfect life. We know about that life, but have yet to experience it. We can take it on faith that it will be every bit as good as the Bible says it is.

As to when and how and all the details? We don't know, and we have never known. We've never known what the future holds. We just may have thought so.

At this point in time, though, we have been made to remember that—we do not know the future.

However, let's also remember to have hope and faith in our Lord and Savior, Jesus—who holds all life in his hands. Amen.

Preached by Reverend Sally J. DeMasters, March 29, 2020.