

John 11:1-45 (NRSVue)

<sup>1</sup> Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup> Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup> So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." <sup>4</sup> But when Jesus heard it, he said, "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." <sup>5</sup> Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, <sup>6</sup> after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

<sup>7</sup> Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." <sup>8</sup> The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" <sup>9</sup> Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble because they see the light of this world. <sup>10</sup> But those who walk at night stumble because the light is not in them." <sup>11</sup> After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." <sup>12</sup> The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." <sup>13</sup> Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. <sup>14</sup> Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. <sup>15</sup> For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." <sup>16</sup> Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

<sup>17</sup> When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. <sup>18</sup> Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, <sup>19</sup> and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. <sup>20</sup> When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. <sup>21</sup> Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." <sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." <sup>24</sup> Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." <sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" <sup>27</sup> She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

<sup>28</sup> When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." <sup>29</sup> And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. <sup>30</sup> Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup> The Jews who were with her in the house consoling her saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. <sup>32</sup> When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." <sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup> He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." <sup>35</sup> Jesus began to weep. <sup>36</sup> So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" <sup>37</sup> But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

<sup>38</sup> Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. <sup>39</sup> Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." <sup>40</sup> Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" <sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for

having heard me. <sup>42</sup>I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” <sup>43</sup>When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” <sup>44</sup>The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

<sup>45</sup> Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did believed in him.

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Today’s passage is a complex story, ultimately with a positive and hopeful ending. I don’t know about you, but as I read the story, I go through a lot of emotion that are extreme. Even though I know how the story ends, I’m baffled at Jesus’ comments and actions. Imagine that you’re there, perhaps as one of the disciples and you’re a witness to all of this in real time. Let us go through the narrative and suspend our knowledge of the outcome; pretend that we “don’t” know what’s going to happen.

We already know that Lazarus, along with his sisters Martha and Mary, have a special relationship with Jesus. So much so that when Lazarus becomes ill, the sisters send word to Jesus for him to come quickly. They say, “Lord, *he whom you love* is ill.”

Upon receiving this notification how does Jesus respond? “Eh! It’s not that terminal. This sickness? – it’s meant to glorify God.” What?! What kind of response is that?! How do you know it’s not serious? The message, as far as we know, only expresses that he is ill and it appears urgent, for why else would they send word?

If Jesus does indeed cherish Lazarus, then it is especially troubling that Jesus does not head right over to Lazarus’ home. I thought they were friends. Aren’t friends supposed to drop everything when you’re sick and you ask for them?

But Jesus doesn’t leave. He in fact says where he is ....**FOR TWO MORE DAYS!**

At this point, I’m thinking, “Jesus really sucks as a friend.”

I would think that his disciples were astounded at Jesus’ behavior. We can imagine them saying things like, “Uh ... Master, shouldn’t we be leaving?” or “Lord, did you understand how sick your friend really is?” or “Is there anything we can do to help wind things up here?”

What was Jesus doing that was so important? We don’t know. The story doesn’t say. I mean, if there were some indications that he was healing the blind or saving other lives, then maybe, *maybe*, we could understand the delay. It seems so insensitive. This is just not the Jesus we know – so it’s baffling and upsetting.

We don’t know what he was doing. It’s possible that Jesus was just linger. Mulling about and praying, perhaps. We don’t know. [Remember to stay in that moment – you don’t know the end of the story!]

According to the story, it was after the two days, when Jesus appears to casually says, “Let’s go to Judea,” that he actually told his disciples about Lazarus and his reason for going.

So, we’re going to Bethany in Judea...for you to visit your friend Lazarus who is gravely ill...of which you knew about his illness two days ago. Well, it’s about time!

Upon arriving to Bethany, we learn that Lazarus has died – four days ago. What would you be thinking? You’d probably be thinking the same thing as Martha. “Well, it’s about time, Mr. Compassionate. Where have you been? IF you’d been here my brother wouldn’t have died. But now he’s dead. Buried in a tomb. And already started to stink.”

See what I mean when I said that Jesus seemed to suck as a friend. Martha believed in Jesus’ friendship and also his powers of salvation. She was angry and grieving. **Had you been here, he wouldn’t have died.** Mary will same the same thing later when she comes to meet Jesus.

But even in her anger, Martha doesn’t give up on her friend Jesus. She says, “Even now, I know that whatever you ask – God will give you.”

Jesus reassures her that everything will be okay. “Lazarus will be raised up.” Martha, believing in God’s salvific resurrections, thinks, “of course he will be,” but Jesus means, “No. Right now. I am the resurrection – the life.”

Martha cries.

Mary sobs.

Their consoling friends wail.

A tear is probably welling up in your eye at this point.

Jesus goes to the tomb....and weeps.

You see this. Your heart softens for Jesus. Okay, maybe he isn’t the worst of friends – look how anguished and sad he is that his friend Lazarus is dead.

It’s a turning point.

THEN – Jesus does what he said and calls Lazarus forth from the grave. The man emerges, fully resuscitated.

It’s the end of the story. So ---- looking back now. Replaying in your mind the things that Jesus said and did – the loitering for two days, talking about Lazarus’ “sleep” and his illness being for the glory of God --- you have a better perspective, a different point of view in which to evaluate – to judge – and reconsider the fact that you actually thought Jesus was a sucky friend.

I’m still perturbed by the fact that despite knowing he would raise Lazarus from the dead, he still allowed Mary and Martha to suffer and grieve *through* Lazarus’ passing and burial. But – perspective, perspective, perspective.

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It is a different worldview, I think, that causes us to puzzle over Jesus’ behavior at the beginning of the Lazarus incident. We try to impose upon him the way we would have acted if the news came to us that one of our good friends were ill, and our help was being requested. We would have rushed right over.

Jesus, however, is oriented toward another world, the kingdom of heaven, where such matters as human death are not the end of things. His perspective enabled him to say to the disciples, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” An outsider hearing Jesus’ remark might even have said

the first-century equivalent of “What planet is *he* from?” But, of course, Jesus actions when he got to where Lazarus was entombed proved that he knew exactly what he was talking about.

Which brings us to this: There is a point in the Christian journey where we have to acknowledge that the ways of God are beyond human understanding.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God said, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (55:8-9). And the writer of Proverbs made the observation that “It is the glory of God to conceal things” (25:2). Not every truth of the universe is made accessible to the human mind. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul admitted the limitations of human knowledge, “For we know only in part ...but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end” (1 Cor 13:9-10,12). He went on say, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.”

Jesus’ actions confound us and even anger us, to the point where we think he sucks as a friend. But our understanding of his actions – of God’s actions - belong to the time beyond this age. Jesus, as the Lord of that future kingdom, already understood, and thus, in the Lazarus incident, his choice to linger before responding to the urgent message from the sisters made sense to him, if not to the disciples or to us.

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I don’t know about you, but it’s hard to have such patience with God’s timing and God’s knowledge. I really want to be in the know. “Jesus, had you just been more explicit as to what was happening with Lazarus: why you were lingering around and why you were saying and doing what you were doing, I wouldn’t have been so sassy with you. I’d never inferred that you sucked as a friend.”

How about that for being passive-aggressive: me blaming Jesus for my lack of patience and understanding.

>> A Norwegian fisherman and his two sons set out for a day of fishing just as they had done hundreds of times previously. This was before modern navigation instruments, and on this day, a heavy fog rolled in, obscuring the coastline. And then darkness fell, and a storm threatened.

Meanwhile, back home, the fisherman’s wife faced trouble of her own. A fire ignited in her kitchen, and before help could arrive, the home was engulfed in flames. As the wife sobbed outside the smoldering ruins of her home, her husband and sons arrived. She turned to her husband and said, “Everything is lost!”

“Not everything,” he replied. “An hour ago our sons and I were lost at sea. Then we saw a small light through the fog and headed for it. The light grew brighter and guided us home. It was our house aflame. The same fire that destroyed our home also saved our lives.”

From his perspective, the house fire had a different meaning. It left them with some problems, but because of it, the things that really mattered were okay, and he was satisfied. <<

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You see, our faith has the right outlook. There are things that are sad and painful in this world, and wherever we can, we should do all we can to alleviate those problems and eliminate the evils that cause them. But when

we reach the limits of our understanding, we need to do our best to rely on our faith, which is based in a worldview that often we don't understand.

We serve a God whose ways are beyond our ways. We follow a Savior, who is oriented to the God's all-encompassing worldview. In trusting God and following Jesus, we can be content and know that the final outcome, the one we can't see except dimly as in a distorting mirror, will be good and right and just and satisfying.

So, in the end I've learned that it wasn't Jesus who was a sucky friend, it was me.

AMEN