

Sermon: John 11:1-45 (Lent 5A)  
Christ Church Riverdale, 9 March 2008  
Robert C. Lamborn, Rector

<sup>NRS</sup> **John 11:1** 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.

When Jesus calls Lazarus back to life, it's the culmination of seven signs recounted in John's Gospel. Just as signs in our world are not ends in themselves, but point to beyond themselves—"do not enter;" "one way;" "clearance sale;" "uptown express"-- so for John the purpose of a sign is to reveal God and glorify the Son. Jesus' seven signs in John are these: turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana, healing a royal official's young son, healing a disabled man (who then gets in trouble for carrying his mat on Sabbath), feeding of the five thousand, walking on water, healing of a man born blind (as we heard last week, and who got into trouble when he couldn't explain how he'd been healed), and now raising Lazarus.

We're used to hearing part of this long story of Lazarus at funerals. He's been dead four days and is buried, so by the time Jesus arrives, we would say (according to in Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's stages of grief) that Martha has moved past denial into anger: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Why did Jesus linger for two days before coming? Even though leaving immediately wouldn't have gotten him there before Lazarus died, these were dear friends to him, and he didn't even make the burial. Remember that Jesus was taking quite a risk going to Bethany in Judea. He had just fled Jerusalem after almost being arrested and stoned, and Bethany is just two towns away from Jerusalem, close enough that mourners walk there from Jerusalem.

Now Martha, having been without her brother 4 days steps not just into anger, but on into bargaining, saying to Jesus, "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask . . . ." We aren't told what illness Lazarus died from, but we get the powerful sense that it was an untimely death, the heartbreak of a person dying too young. "Jesus began to weep," and he did so greatly disturbed, deeply moved—angry, even. An Episcopal priest who lives in Tennessee wrote about the universal pain of grief in this story, "Be it in Bethany or the Bronx, the same darkness envelops the human heart."<sup>1</sup> Even though darkness is enveloping Jesus' heart, he's able to move beyond finger-pointing to look death squarely in the eye and then put death in its place.

"Roll away the stone," he asks, brushing aside the very practical concern that the unembalmed body will smell awful. "Lazarus, come out!" he shouts, and then has people unbind him from the burial cloths tightly wrapping his body. Jesus calling Lazarus back to life is the culmination of his signs in another way, too--the final nail in his coffin, so to speak. Jesus is becoming so popular; he's gained such notoriety that the religious authorities get scared it will cause the Romans to crack down, and when the Romans crack down, it's not pretty, but means brutal treatment. So one man, they decide, has to die "for the greater good."

Theologian Douglas John Hall has written of what he calls a "covenant with death," a concept that is both ancient and completely up-to-date: "You placate the gods of death and destruction in order to guarantee for a little longer what you are calling 'life.'" This life, however, has become "tainted with the smell of the mausoleum."<sup>2</sup> One of the characteristics of this covenant with death is the psychic numbing we experience from being overwhelmed by so much suffering and death around the world—more than we can take in. That can make us lose our sensitivity and get us accustomed to the idea that there's nothing we can do to help.

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<sup>1</sup> H. King Oehmig, "Postscript" in *Synthesis* (17 March 2002), 4.

<sup>2</sup> *The Stewardship of Life in the Kingdom of Death*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), 34.

A bill was recently adopted by both houses of Congress that would limit the technique used for interrogation by the CIA to the same techniques the military is allowed to use. While a number of so-called “enhanced interrogation techniques” are at issue, waterboarding is the most prominent example. It’s pouring water into a person’s mouth, often covering their face with a cloth, until they have the physical sensation that they’re about to drown and supposedly become panicked enough into give information. (If you want to, just hold your breath for as long as you can, and then some, but imagine that the reason you can’t breathe is that water’s being poured in your mouth and your nose is closed.) Now the President has vetoed these restrictions. While the CIA is currently not allowed to waterboard, and the Bush administration has renounced torture, it’s also refused to take waterboarding “off the table”--declined to say, “we won’t ever go there!”

Now don’t get me wrong; I’m not ignoring the danger of terrorism; I’m not suggesting that there are no people in the world bound and determined to do harm. This can happen whether or not we use coercion to interrogate, since information gained under duress has often proven not to be reliable. I’m not ignoring the danger of terrorism, but I for one would feel safer, less at risk for being attacked if the United States could be known the world over as a country that doesn’t split hairs over whether waterboarding constitutes torture. Even though Douglas John Hall was writing during the Cold War, I see something of a covenant with death if we as a country believe that the only way for us to be safe is by keeping the option open to engage in activities like waterboarding.

There are many kinds of death, and not all of them are biological. There are many things we can have shut up in a tomb, bound tightly with burial cloths. Are we willing to take away the stone, to risk the stench of death so that Jesus can call us to new life? Are we able to move beyond blaming to trust that relationship with Jesus is resurrection and life, whether in Bethany or in the Bronx or in Baghdad? Are we courageous enough to make our covenant not to preserve a little bit more of death-tinged life but to pursue the abundant life that Jesus promises? Are we generous enough to seek that life not just for ourselves but for the humanity made in God’s image? Jesus said, “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” He knows good and well that physical death will continue in this world, but offers to us a gift, pleads with us to accept—to live according to--a covenant with life that begins in the here and now and will endure to all eternity.