

Lent 5A Sermon
John 11:1-45
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“More Questions Than Answers”
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Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill.’ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping, and those who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Jesus began to weep. So the people said, ‘See how he loved him!’ But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?’ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 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 for four days.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?’ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, ‘God, I thank you for having heard me. 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.’ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ 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.’ Many of those therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

There are Bible stories that provide more questions than answers. For me, this one from John's gospel is definitely among them. So many questions. Like, why did it take so long for Jesus to get to Bethany? Why did Jesus himself weep, assuming he knew what was about to happen? Why was Jesus "greatly disturbed," as the text suggests. Why did Jesus raise the aging Lazarus if he was just going to die again? Why is John's gospel the only one to mention that Mary and Martha had a brother named Lazarus and that he was raised from the dead? What exactly did the people who witnessed these events believe about Jesus: that he was truly the resurrection and the life or that he was some sort of necromancer? It's also interesting that this passage is book-ended by a story of Jesus' rejection, attempted arrest, and escape, on the one side, and on the other side, a plot to put Jesus to death because he was raising the dead. I really do have so many questions about this bizarre, apparently controversial, and underreported episode in the life of Jesus. And the story just doesn't provide satisfactory answers.

I find that this is often the case, especially with the Bible, with matters of faith, and with human beings in general. We seem to operate under the illusion that, as the NBC public service announcements once suggested, *the more you know*, the less you presumably won't know. But that's just not how it works, is it? In truth, the more we seem to learn, the less we seem to know, or as the Icelandic author Halldór Laxness once put it, "One asks and asks and always the answers become more incomprehensible than the question. In the end one becomes an idiot."¹ Perhaps that's taking it a bit far, but it does seem like there are, quite simply, more questions than answers. And that's often unsettling.

Psychologists tell us that:

¹ Halldór Laxness. *Under the Glacier*, New York: Vintage, 2005.

When we can't immediately gratify our desire to know, we become highly motivated to reach a concrete explanation. . . We want to eliminate the distress of the unknown. We want, in other words, to achieve "cognitive closure." This term was coined by the social psychologist Arie Kruglanski, who eventually defined it as "individuals' desire for a firm answer to a question and an aversion toward ambiguity," a drive for certainty in the face of a less than certain world. When faced with heightened ambiguity and a lack of clear-cut answers, we need to know—and as quickly as possible.²

Human beings don't do particularly well with not knowing. We're wired to know, to understand or at least seek understanding. As it relates to faith, I'm not sure that's a bad thing: there are many questions and we seek answers, but we learn that our answers often lead to more questions. It's circular, but it's also kind of beautiful. Einstein once said that "[t]he important thing is not to stop questioning. Never [to] lose a holy curiosity." I like that. Our questing, questioning, curious minds are a gift and the process of seeking, discovering, and wondering is truly holy.

So, what does that really have to do with Lazarus, you might be wondering. Truthfully, nothing. And everything. My rational mind doesn't know what to do with stories of people coming back from the dead. My rational mind doesn't know what to do with prophets that perform miracles. My rational mind doesn't know what to do with people who are also professed as God.

For some, the absence of empirical data to support a claim renders it false, or at least unlikely. For others, truth is a little harder to pin down; something can be true without being historical. Something can be true without being factual. And still for others, truth, at least in some things, is a matter simply to be taken on faith. What's true in the story of the

² Maria Konnikova. "Why We Need Answers," Newyorker.com, April 30, 2013:
<https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/why-we-need-answers>.

raising of Lazarus and what does it mean for us? The answer to that question will come down to what you make of truth itself.

The truth of this story is that its author believed Jesus to be the incarnate Word of God—the Word made flesh—God fully alive in the world. As such, Jesus was deeply moved by the pain he saw in humanity and the brokenness he experienced in the world. He was fully capable of bringing life from death and the raising of Lazarus merely foreshadowed the ultimate triumph of life over death that would come with Jesus' own resurrection a short time later.

What do you think? For me, I'm still filled with questions—with what Einstein called “holy curiosity.” And I think that's okay. I'm resisting the human need to know definitively. I don't get cognitive closure out of this, but I do get to continue the search. I'm reassured by something Helen Keller once said: “A well-educated mind will always have more questions than answers.” So, let's keep asking them. The search for answers is itself a worthwhile, even holy thing. Thanks be to God. Amen.