

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on March 29, 2020 (V Lent, Year A)

Whenever we come together as an online community on Sunday mornings, we always pray for the first responders and others who are on the front lines of this global pandemic. These folks, several of whom are members of our own congregation, are literally risking their lives to save others. And I know we are all grateful for their work and ministry during this time.

One of the things about the story of the raising of Lazarus that stands out to me is that Jesus is in no hurry. If you call 911 and tell them someone in your home has been critically injured, you expect a quick response. They're called emergency responders for a reason — firefighters and paramedics and police and ER doctors rapidly respond to a crisis. They race, they don't mosey.

Yet when Mary and Martha send word to Jesus that Lazarus — their dear friend — is gravely ill, his response is anything *but* rapid. He's not like an ambulance driver careening through the streets with sirens wailing and lights flashing. He's not throwing on boots and sliding down a pole to get to the scene. Jesus is more like the tortoise in Aesop's fable about the tortoise and the hare. In fact, he's even slower than the tortoise who at least crosses the starting line. We hear that although he loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus, Jesus stayed right where he was for two days. He waited 48 hours before even beginning his journey to Bethany.

And it's hard to imagine the agony Mary and Martha experienced during that long interval. Perhaps if he left immediately and rushed to Lazarus' bedside, Jesus would have made it on time. But by the time he arrives, Lazarus had already been dead for four days. It's not that the sisters expected Jesus to fix the situation. I mean, when someone dies, that's the end of it. But when someone is dying, we gather.

Many of you have had the experience of gathering around a death bed to keep vigil with a loved one, as they slip out of this world. Time stands still, prayers are said, stories are told, hands are held, tears are shed. These are holy moments. And when it came to his friend Lazarus, Jesus missed them; he wasn't there.

In this time of pandemic, what I find most heartbreaking are the stories I hear of families unable to gather. Of priests offering last rites over the phone rather than in person, of people dying alone, rather than surrounded by loved ones.

But even in these moments, the story of Lazarus points to something deeper. Jesus wasn't taking his time because he didn't care or because he too wasn't grieving. Jesus sees beyond death. Jesus offers hope that transcends the pain of the current situation. Whether that's the grief of losing a close friend; or the crushing reality of a pandemic that has taken the lives of so many across the world; or even being strung up on a cross to die. Jesus sees beyond death. And in so doing, he lifts our eyes up to the possibilities of new life, to a way of being that transcends even matters of life and death.

Perhaps we're collectively in something like that waiting period experienced by Mary and Martha. A time of keeping vigil amid uncertainty, a time of fear and grief. A time of emotional and physical isolation. A time of wondering when, exactly, God will show up.

Yet just because Jesus isn't physically present with his friends doesn't mean he's not doing anything. He is prayerful, he is calm, he is deliberate as he makes his journey to Bethany. He is with them in spirit, just as he is with us. Even in his physical absence he is walking with Mary and Martha through their grief, foreshadowing perhaps the grief they will soon feel when Jesus himself is crucified and no longer able to be physically with them.

In a word, Jesus holds out hope. That's what it means to see beyond death. And it's what Jesus offers to us in this particular moment. We don't know exactly when we'll all be able to physically be together again. It certainly won't be in time to celebrate the resurrection on Easter Day. But the resurrection will still come. Jesus will still be present with us. That's the hope held out to us, the hope I want you to hold onto firmly and faithfully in the days ahead.

And in the meantime, we are all in our own particular valleys of dry bones right now. For some of us, this valley involves profound isolation and loneliness and depression; for some it is a valley of competing demands between work and family and the nagging sense that we are falling short; for some it is a sense of being overwhelmed by fear and anxiety. Like grief, none of this is linear and it comes in waves, often when we least expect it.

Yet, even in the midst of these difficult times we catch glimpses of hope and joy. Again, Jesus sees beyond death. And these holy moments offer glimpses of glory. It may be Face-timing with a grandchild, or playing Scrabble with the family on a random Tuesday evening, or taking the dog for (yet another) walk and soaking in some fresh air.

Here at St. John's, Jack threw out a Facebook challenge to invite individuals and families to post videos of themselves dancing to a Meghan Trainor song with the chorus "I thank God every day." It's been a joy to see everyone from three-year-olds to former Senior Wardens rise to the challenge. For some reason, I agreed to participate if we got up to 10 videos. Which, unfortunately, we did in a matter of days.

Now, and you may find this hard to believe, I'm not a dancer. In fact, the last time I danced was when Bryna and my brother dragged me to a salsa dancing lesson a couple summers ago on a trip to South America. And, I kid you not, it was the *longest hour of my life*. About halfway through, as Bryna and Matt were moving their hips to the music and having a grand time, my instructor threw up her hands and told me that I moved like "a penguin." But a deal was a deal, so I too participated in the dance challenge.

The point is, Jesus invites us to find joy even in the midst of what feels unbearable. And if that means a bunch of parishioners shaking it on camera to bond as a family or bring a smile to the rest of us, or me publicly humiliating myself, I am all in.

Jesus may not be a first responder in the way that we think about them. But he is *the* first responder. The one who responds to our every need. Not necessarily in the ways that we wish for, or on a timeline of our own choosing, but in the ways that we need. Jesus is the first responder in love, the first responder in compassion, the first responder in hope. Jesus sees beyond death. And the vision he shares with us, is a stunning vista of resurrection glory.