

Sermon: In the end, what's the story?

Year A, Fourth Sunday of Easter

[John 11:1-45](#)

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There is so much in this story from John. So many images come floating up from the symphony of images we explored a number of weeks ago when we looked at the Healing of the Man Born Blind. This story is where Thomas, who we know as Doubting Thomas, showed how far from doubting he is. This story is the last of the miracle stories in the Gospel of John. John's miracles appear in a sequence, from the smallest, turning water into wine at the Wedding at Cana, to this one the Resurrection of Lazarus. This story foreshadows Jesus' own death and resurrection. In the Gospel of John, it is the resurrection of Lazarus that gets Jesus into fatal trouble with the authorities. It is the resurrection of Lazarus that triggers the events that, tumbling over themselves, one after another, lead to Mary Magdalene weeping outside an empty tomb on Easter morning.

There is so much in this story from John. There is belief and resurrection, grief and blame, this world and the next. There is so much in this story from John that we miss what it is, at the very, most basic level. It is a love story.

11:2 Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. Love story.

11:3 So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." Love story.

11:5 Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, Love story.

11:16 Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Love story.

11:18-19 Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. Love story.

11:20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Love story.

11:28-29 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." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Love story.

11:33-36 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews 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 Jews said, "See how he loved him!" Love story.

11:41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me." Love story.

11:43 When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" Love story.

So much of our end of life care is done in hospitals and critical care settings. That's where we tell diagnosis and treatment stories. That's where we tell efficiency and efficacy stories. That's where we tell cost management and overtime hours stories. Because those are all important stories, sometimes they get in the way of telling the love stories. My experience with hospice, both personally and professionally, is that they specialize in prioritizing the love stories. They can't tell them, because they are the family's story to tell. But they can clear all the other stuff out of the way, so the family can focus on what matters most, which is telling the love stories.

Don't get me wrong. The end of life can be a complicated, challenging place to be. You can be angry because people you wanted there waited two days before coming. You can be frightened because you're pretty sure someone you love won't be physically safe with the people they are going to see. People can completely misunderstand what's going on, and you're the one who has to explain that, no, he is not sleeping, he's dying. Whole tribes of people can show up trying to console you when you just want to be with family. And it can smell bad.

Mental illness and drug abuse can have taken your loved one away years before you get to the end of their life. You can have spent a lifetime being the wrong child for that parent, or the sibling that just did not fit with the other brothers and sisters. Hospice can't change that. But they can create a space and time for you to gather as a family to tell love stories. Even if they are stories of what you hoped for in the relationship that now will never come to pass.

When we put off involving hospice in the end of life care, we often put off the love stories. The one thing I have heard consistently, with every family who has ever been involved with a hospice program, is that they wished they called hospice sooner. Look at the love stories that Home Health and Hospice Care sent over. Not one of them ends with someone coming back to life four days after they were pronounced dead. But all of them testify to love enduring beyond the grave. To love so clear that a single sentence conveys it to complete strangers. "Lee died peacefully, embraced by his family with love all around him." Love story.

Martha meets Jesus on the road. She believes in the resurrection of the dead. It will happen at some point in the future. And we know Martha. She's a practical lady with a to-do list a mile long. She's missing her brother terribly, and she's probably one of those people who needs to keep moving to keep from falling apart. Jesus goes out to the tomb and asks for the stone to be rolled away. And practical woman that she is, she wants Jesus to remember her brother the way he was in life, the way he was when Jesus last saw him.

But at the critical moment in the middle of that crowd of disciples, mourners, family members, Jesus looks only at Martha, and says, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?". In Greek, it's you singular¹, meaning not the crowd, just Martha. This miracle is not for Lazarus or even for Mary who will anoint Jesus for his death. This miracle is for Martha, that she might believe. Love story.

Jesus' love is there for Martha, personally, because Jesus is in personal relationship with each one of us. However they come to it, with hospice or without, the people we love will meet death. We will do that oh, so human thing that Jesus did with Mary and Martha and all the rest. We will weep. Even as we weep, even as enjoy coffee hour or watch our kids graduate or drop our parents off at the airport for their cruise of a lifetime, Jesus is telling us that he is the resurrection

¹ Gerard Sloyan, *John*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1988), 143.

and the life. We don't have to wait until some faraway time in the future. Jesus died 2,000 years ago, and the love he offered the world is still greater than what death took away. Jesus has promised Martha, promised us, individually, that death cannot take away more than love leaves behind. Love story.