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St. John's Lutheran Church

"It's Beautiful and Devastating, All at the Same Time"

John 11:1-45

1 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴ 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." ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸ The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹ After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." ¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." ²⁸ 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." ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ 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. ³² 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." ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept

this man from dying?"³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.³⁹ 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."⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me.⁴² 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."⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"⁴⁴ 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."⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Psalm 130

1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.² Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!³ If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?⁴ But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.⁵ I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;⁶ my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.⁷ O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.⁸ It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

Beloved people of God, wherever you are, however you are, grace and peace and mercy are yours in the name of Christ. Amen.

In 2008, an unemployed 47-year-old Scottish woman living with Asperger's syndrome walked on stage to audition for the television show *Britain's Got Talent*. Her name was Susan Boyle. Perhaps you remember her.

Susan Boyle was against all odds the moment she walked out on to that big stage to sing. Her appearance was awkward, disheveled, and kind of scattered. She wanted to be a professional singer. But the audience's expectations were low and everyone knew it. The audience rolled their eyes. The judges snickered and were sarcastic. But then she started to sing that well-known song from *Les Miserables*.

I dreamed a dream of time gone by...

And suddenly, the whole world sort of shook on its axis. Jaws dropped; eyes widened. Susan Boyle revealed a voice we assumed she could never have.

I always get goosebumps when I watch the performance. Because everything we expected to happen didn't. This woman, Susan Boyle, should have failed. She should have offered us a mediocre and karaoked version of an otherwise beautiful song. But what struck me this week, when I watched it again was not what happened on stage, but what happened in the audience.

From the opening line, the crowd went wild. They were overwhelmed with surprise and joy. They got on their feet, to cheer and applaud. But then a shift happens. As a hush goes over the crowd to keep listening, there is almost a sense of guilt and shame behind the unblinking eyes of everyone watching. A quiet moment when our own judgements and assumptions and, really, our mistreatment of this human being, we were all so ready to laugh at, were revealed.

But then she gets to that crushingly honest ending, another shift in audience happens. Susan Boyle sings out like this is the song of her life,

*I had a dream my life would be
So different from this hell I'm living
So different now from what it seemed
Now life has killed the dream
I dreamed.*

In the moment, it was like this feeling of solidarity fell amongst the crowd. That everyone there was thinking of the dreams they'd had for their life and their loved one's lives. Dreams that could not be. Those words, that moment, felt so truthful that it both hurt and healed at the same time.

In a matter of minutes, that auditorium was overwhelmed with a complexity of mixed emotions at what was happening before their eyes. Humor and surprise. Joy and sadness. Regret and hope. All mixed together in the same moment. And there wasn't a dry eye in the place. It was both beautiful and devastating at the same time.

Beautiful and devastating – a complexity of mixed emotions. If there is any way to describe this moment in history we are in as a community, personally, “beautiful and devastating - a complexity of mixed emotions” about sums it up for me.

But our society doesn't like mixed emotions very well. We like clarity.

On Facebook, you are only given 6 options of how to feel about something. You can like it (thumbs up), you can love it, you can laugh at it, you can feel surprised, you can feel sad, or you can feel angry. But here's the thing, you can only pick one. Which sort of reflects our own societal expectations – you are either happy or sad or grateful or angry or....but doesn't Facebook and don't we know that we can have mixed emotions about something? That we can feel both sadness *and* anger. That we can feel both gratitude *and* fear. That we can feel both joy *and* disappointment.

It's like feeling of standing on the edge of a diving board for the first time. You're excited. And your nervous.

Or the feeling of standing at the edge of a grave. You're devastated from the loss. And relieved. Released from years of ongoing pain, for them and for you.

As I wrestled with this story of Lazarus being raised from the dead this week, what stood out wasn't the sheer unbelievable miracle of this event, but rather the complexity of mixed emotions we find all around it. Particularly in Jesus, Thomas, Martha, and Mary.

First there is Jesus. When Jesus first hears that the one whom he loves, his friend Lazarus, is ill, he almost seems a little cavalier about it. Almost too confident. *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.*

In fact, to everyone's distress, Jesus even waits two days to go see Lazarus. Some might say this is Jesus' denial. That's what some of us do in times of crisis— we mask our fear and get overly confident and stay away from that which devastates us.

Then there is Thomas. When Jesus does finally want to go to Bethany to see Lazarus, the disciples get afraid – for Jesus' safety and their own. But Thomas...we might rebrand him Brave Thomas... straightens up and courageously proclaims, "Then let us go and die with him." That's what some of us do too in times of great uncertainty— we have moments of good courage. Where we see the uncertain and frightening path set before us, and we step out with our chin up and with Jesus by our side.

Next comes Martha. Martha sees Jesus on this horizon, outside the kitchen window, and she cannot wait one more minute. She puts down the hummus platter she was preparing for the funeral visitation that had gathered at her house, and she walks right up to Jesus and wastes no time. *Lord, if you had been here. Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.*

And then she says these three little words that have stayed with me. *But even now.*

Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died...but even now I know that God will give you anything you ask.

John 11 is the center of John's gospel and this conversation with Martha is the center of the chapter. And so it is here – in the center of the center – that the mixed emotions of grief and trust, anger and hope, doubt and faith are held together in one body.

In the honesty and courage of Martha to not be forced to just pick one, but to recognize the despair and the hope that are alive in her. *I am so angry at you, Jesus...But even now, I have faith.* It's devastating and beautiful, all at the same time.

I think so many of us have found ourselves in that place this week. The mix of emotions all at the same time. The *But even now* place, seeing the beauty and the devastation.

I hate not being together – it's devastating. *But even now* I see us choosing the most loving and faithful thing our church can do. It's beautiful.

I love the poetry and imagination about how all this time at home will prune us into flourish trees again – it's beautiful. *but even now* I see all the known and unknown losses piling up – post-poned graduations and weddings, collapsing businesses, and the precious lives ending separate from their loved ones. It's devastating.

As a pastor, I panic at the truth of not knowing what to say about all these things – it's devastating. *But even now* I have watched you become pastors to each other and to this community as you speak words of hope and solidarity in the midst of suffering – words I couldn't find but so needed to hear. It's beautiful.

I marvel at what we are capable of and at what speed to turn our community and our world around and upside down out of concern for one another – it's beautiful. *But even now* I know that so many others around the world have needed a global response, a state of emergency declared for the state of their world, long before our livelihood was threatened. It's devastating.

Martha carries within her a mix of emotions and we all know the feeling.

And then finally, there is Mary. Mary is the one who really haunts me. She is the one who has been wrapped up in a blanket on the couch for hours since her brother died and hasn't said a thing. Life has killed the dream and she's just been staring at the wall wondering if that will come crumbling down too. Her sister Martha has to stir her awake to let her know that their friend, Jesus, is there. She quickly stumbles out to where Jesus is. Unlike Martha, she doesn't yell. She just looks at him with those hollow eyes. And all she has are her tears and the borrowed words of her sister– *Lord, if you had been here...*

Jesus had a lot of deep theological words to share with Martha when she confronted him, words about him being the resurrection and the life. But Jesus knows not to get theological here with Mary. It's not the time and he wouldn't win.

Where have you laid him? Jesus asks, quietly.

Lord, come and see, they said.

And in that moment, it all caught up with him. Jesus began to weep too.

Which is how it happens. You try to hold on tight to just one emotion at a time – whether it is courage or faith or confidence or well-honed-joy-look-alike, or a strategic vulnerability – and then you are standing in the middle of your upstairs hallway, when the sadness and the loss and the fear and the disappointment and the anger and the shame, that have been mixed in there all along, show up and you finally just weep. And weep. And weep.

Now, I don't know if it was the fact that Mary and everyone around were weeping that eventually cracked his shell and made Jesus weep too. But part of me thinks it was those words,

“Lord, come and see.” Those were Jesus’ words. Those were the words he used to call his disciples to be his followers, and now they were being used on him. Jesus is the disciple now. Just for this moment. To follow the grieving, all the way to his best friend’s tomb.

When Thomas stood tall with a willing confidence to enter this fraught and uncertain road with Jesus, Jesus walked beside him and led the way. When Martha wanted to scream but also hold onto hope, when she wanted to talk theology and find the meaning in all this, Jesus abided with her in that place and talked it out. And when Mary had nothing left but the sound of her weeping, Jesus wept with her. It’s all so beautiful and so devastating at the same time and we know the feeling.

This past week, a handful of wise people have helpfully named this strange time, this strange feeling we are feeling for what it is: grief. David Kessler, a grief expert, says that we are grieving on a micro and macro level.¹ In fact, he doesn’t simply say we are feeling grief, but rather that we are feeling a number of griefs. Plural. At the same time.

Grief can show up like the courage of Thomas to face the moment with eyes wide open. Or it can show up like the mixed emotions of anger and hope, frustration and resiliency like Martha. And it can show up like the exhausting and crushing despair of Mary. And everything in between. It can be joy at the messages of hope written in crayon and displayed in house windows, followed by overwhelming frustration at the loss of normalcy and routine. It can be the shame of seeing inequity and hunger and desperation exposed in our darkest hour met by the gift of unawareness displayed by children dressed in costumes all-day long, slaying dragons and building in-side forts.

Friends, the gift at this time of this story from John 11 is that it gives us a wide-angle snap shot of grief. Catching all the edges of what grief can look like. And it’s all grief.

And to quote just about every therapist I’ve tried not to listen to – the best thing we can do is to sit with it. To *feel* the griefs, plural.

So, which person in the story are you? Have you felt the courage and determination of Thomas – to go where Jesus will lead you all of this? Have you, like Martha, washed up on the complex yet honest shores of anger and hope? Angry that the world is the way it is at the moment, but hopeful and trusting that this isn’t forever, it’s just for now. Have you collapsed to your knees, like Mary, in the middle of your living room, weeping and overwhelmed by the mountain of losses that have yet to be discovered and recognized in all of this? Have you felt the slow but sometimes sudden slide between all these griefs?

Which person in the story have you been this week? Have you, like me, been all three? Which person are you right now? And can you sit there for just a moment?

¹ https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief?fbclid=IwAR01G0j9WCLQLRoq4jQwr8_hgmjQKst3W0IKu7Cwow7V3huqZkSAznBYbGo

Thomas, and Mary and Martha had to wait for the Lord. It was devastating. And at times, it will feel like we will have to wait for the Lord too. But when Jesus shows up - and he will show up - he will stand *with* you and your mixed emotions of grief, in solidarity. Solidarity – “all the ways...to stand alongside those who are in pain or sorrow, treated cruelly or unfairly, facing fear or the unknown.”² Solidarity is the work of Jesus Christ, God with us. And to be the body of Christ, the Church (which is not a building), is to follow Christ in solidarity with the world. It’s beautiful.

In the midst of grief, it is solidarity we long for. And in Jesus, it is solidarity we get.

Hear again those hopeful words of the Psalmist who knows what it means to cry to the Lord, out of the depths. *I wait for you, O Lord. My soul waits. Your word is my hope. O People of God, wait for the Lord. For with the Lord there is steadfast love.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.

² Sam Wells, *The Nazareth Manifesto*, pg. 78