

Scripture Lesson, Part 1: John 11:1-8, 14-26*Pew Bible N.T. pg. 98-98*

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?" ... 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.

Scripture Lesson, Part 2: John 11:28-44*Pew Bible N.T. pg. 99*

²⁸ Martha 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 And 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."

John 11:1-8, 14-26, 28-44

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“NCIS Gibbs’ Rules – Rule #10: Never Get Personally Involved On A Case”

Rev. Amy Terhune

Rule #10 – Never get personally involved on a case. This is Gibbs’ way of saying ‘keep your head in the game’. Don’t let your emotions carry the day, or you may not be able to properly analyze the data before you. Sometimes the jerks are innocent, and sometimes the ones with which they feel the deepest kinship are guilty. The Board of Ordained Ministry doesn’t use Gibbs’ Rules, but they follow this one, only they use different language. Can this person maintain healthy boundaries? That’s the standard for clergy, but it’s the same thing. Even clergy cannot be effective counselors or pastors if they can’t keep a certain level of distance – if we are hooked by the same emotional lures. An ability to recognize harmful patterns and behaviors requires healthy boundaries. To be helpful, one must be able to both empathize and to offer perspective, distance, alternative ways of looking at the same data. Which I’ll be the first to admit, is a tricky balance on occasion. Even Gibbs admits that. It’s the rule he has the most trouble with. Eventually, it comes back around. Rule #10 is the only rule so far that Gibbs’ eventually burns. Not because we don’t need healthy boundaries, but because personal involvement is unavoidable if one is a person. If you care about your work, if you care about others, sooner or later, you have a personal stake. It’s part of being human. We’re built for compassion. We’re driven by that in which our hearts feel vested. So never get personally involved on a case isn’t a rule we can ever follow.

And Jesus could have told him that. Jesus is always personally involved. Today’s lesson is, if not THE most powerful example of that truth, certainly in the top ten. The story itself is relatively straightforward. Lazarus is an old friend; one who has hosted Jesus under his roof many times, one whom Jesus loved, according to scripture. His sister Mary sits at Jesus’ feet to listen and learn, while sister Martha feeds them well, does laundry, serves as the gracious host that sees to their every comfort. The whole household have all come to believe that Jesus is God’s Messiah, and they are devoted followers, so when Lazarus falls ill, Mary and Martha send word to Jesus immediately. They know he can heal. They’ve seen it with their own eyes. Interestingly, they don’t actually ask Jesus to come. They assume that once Jesus knows of the illness, of course he will come. He does not, a fact which Jesus explains to his disciples as being about revealing God’s glory and building faith. But Mary and Martha don’t know that.

They care for him in his illness. They are there when he breathes his last. They wash his body, anoint it with oils and spices, wrap it up in grave cloths, and lay him in a tomb. And they mourn. One day. Two days. Three days. Four days before Jesus finally shows up. That a long time to sit with grief and sorrow. A long time to let Mary and Martha suffer the pain and fears they’ve got to be feeling. After all, not only have they lost their beloved brother, but they’ve also lost their security and their provider. They are two women left alone in a patriarchal culture.

But I will also own the fact that I’m not entirely comfortable with Jesus’ choices here. It feels a little too engineered to me; a little too showy, like a stage-manager is running this rather than a savior. You might be shocked that I would suggest such a thing. Maybe even

uncomfortable. But I'm hardly the first. Commentators all the way back to Tertullian in the third century have wondered if this isn't a little insensitive. Sometimes we have to wrestle with a text in order to find our way through it. It may be that Jesus was doing important work where he was, or it may be that Jesus felt it worth the suffering to stress the lesson of hope and possibility that he was about to teach. Or it may be that in trying to build suspense in the telling of the event, John doesn't realize how he makes Jesus look a little...well...NOT personally involved. But whatever the reason, we can't deny that Jesus comes through in the end.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Before the raising of Lazarus, Jesus speaks with both sisters. Martha is first. She's waiting for Jesus, maybe tapping her foot, hands perched on her hips, eyes glaring. At least, that's the sense I get from the telling. "Lord, if you'd been here, this wouldn't have happened," Martha tells him. Which is essentially a round-about way of saying, Lord, this is your fault. And she's not the only one saying it. Mary says it too, and others in the crowd have the same response: Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying? Why didn't he come? Why didn't he act? Why didn't he drop everything and save the day?

But even as they demand an answer, their own history speaks. Elijah raised a widow's son to life. Elisha did the same. Abraham found a ram to replace the sacrifice of his son Isiah. Jonah is brought up again from the belly of a whale. The psalmists speak again and again about being lifted from Sheol and raised out of the pit. And Ezekiel sees a vision of dry bones clattering together, with flesh and sinews and skin growing on them, death in reverse, and the Spirit of God blows, and the whole multitude inhales the breath of life, and this becomes the promise of what God will do for a defeated nation in exile. Life, hope, newness, energy, breath, resurrection. It's not just a Jesus thing. God has been doing this for millennia. And so Jesus rightly tells Martha, "I am..." I am... God's very name—Yahweh—I am! The great I AM who breathed life into Adam and Eve, who parted the Red Sea and thundered upon the mountain, who controls the sea and makes dry bones become living human beings, the Great I AM speaks. "*I am* the resurrection and the life." The God of the universe speaks through the lips of her friend Jesus of Nazareth. And she knows it. Unlike Peter, who has to be prompted ("so who do you say that I am?") Martha falls to her knees and declares, "You are the Messiah, the son of God!"

And then the Great I AM, the Lord of all that is, gets personally involved. He enters into all those emotions they're experiencing right along with them. The record is very clear here. It's the shortest verse in all scripture: Jesus began to weep. In the old King James, it was even shorter: Jesus wept. Jesus, who was there when the earth was made and the stars flung to furthest reaches of infinity; Jesus, who crammed his divinity into flesh and blood; Jesus who may well have recognized that the road which began at Bethlehem would end at Golgatha; Jesus, who knew the Great I AM as 'Abba' Dad; who knew the power of the Lord to bring life—this same Jesus wept at a tomb just like you and I. Why? It certainly wasn't because he doubted God's ability to work resurrection. It was because it hurts! It was because he loved these two women and he loved their brother. Their pain was his pain. Our pain is his pain. We don't suffer alone.

"Rev. Shannon J. Kershner, a Presbyterian pastor, tells of a parishioner named Jane who was battling severe clinical depression. Some of you know what that is like. Jane felt like she was sitting at the bottom of a deep hole. It was dark and big and she felt so small.

“Jane sat there in that pit, feeling betrayed and angry with herself and with God. Kershner was fairly fresh out of seminary and had become well acquainted with the Lament Psalms—those psalms in the Bible that let it all hang out in regards to anger and frustration with God. She pulled a few of them out and began to read them with Jane. She said, “See? What you feel is right here in Scripture. It is faithful to feel this way. These psalms help remind us that God is in the pit with us. Even when you feel God’s absence, God’s presence still covers you.”

“Kershner said she was trying to speak faithfully and truthfully to this woman. But Jane looked up at her and said through her tears, “Shannon, I don’t want a God who will sit with me in the pit. I want a God who will pull me out of it.” [3 ¶s from www.woodhavenpres.org/Sermons/03-13-05.pdf; as adapted from “No More Tears” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] I can certainly understand that, can’t you? So we turn to John 11 and we find a God who not only joins us in the pit, in the stink, in the tomb, one who not only hears and understands our bitterness, our frustration, our sorrow, but one who also rolls back the stone and calls us out of it.

“Lazarus, come out!” And out he came, still all wrapped up in those moldy, sticky, crusty, rancid grave clothes. Lazarus came out still bound to death, for he could not shed his humanness. None of us can. There are so many things that bind us to death. Fear, money, hatred, lust, and a hunger for power. They stick to us, they bind us up, they make us gag because they’re so rancid and yet we can’t get free of them. But if you skip ahead a couple of chapters, you’ll remember that Jesus left his grave clothes in the tomb and came out free. Death just doesn’t stick to Jesus. And his voice calls us out to freedom too. And not just to freedom. His voice calls us to believe in what seems impossible. His voice calls us to rise above fear, above despair, above resignation. It calls us to hope and courage and newness. It calls us to cast off the rancor and rise to the fullness of all we’re created to be. It calls us to resurrection. It’s not just for Easter. It’s for life.

As to what happened to Lazarus, that’s anyone’s guess. He never says another word. In the very next chapter, he hosts Jesus again under his roof. I love how Amy-Jill Levine writes of this. She says, “Lazarus will appear again, still silent, at the table... The smell of death will be replaced by Mary’s costly perfume poured out on Jesus’ feet. Lazarus remains silent, watching, waiting. It is up to us to finish his story....and ours.” [adapted from “Signs and Wonders” by Amy-Jill Levine (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2022) pg. 130.] Which means that you’re going to have to get personally involved. But then again, if I’ve got this right, that’s how Jesus wants it. Dare we say: Thanks be to God? Amen.