

Learnings from a Grave Situation

John 11:1-45

The world is in turmoil. Our pattern of living, our freedom to work and travel, our engaging with one another physically have all been severely restricted. Some people have felt these restrictions, even without the experience of complete isolation, as a harsh confinement, almost like a prison. For others, it has been more like retreating into an isolated holiday space, a comfortable refuge from the danger, but offering no real relief from anxiety or fear.

To those needing social interaction, or wide-open spaces and fresh air to feel alive, these restrictions feel like a grave. I've still been able to walk outdoors with our dog Ruby in preparation for the ALWS Walk My Way on April 18th, which we will now do as an independent 26 km Woof my Way.

Tell us how has it been for you? We, the church at St Paul's Box Hill, want to be a refuge in offering care and concern via Internet and phone calls; by our prayers for one another; by offering needed encouragement; and offering assistance as we are able. How is it going for you? To whom have you reached out? Is there someone that you could be checking in on, and offering support to?

If we haven't yet managed to contact you, please contact us and let us know your needs – let us also know your ideas and what you may be able to offer our community. We don't want anyone to be feeling unloved, or forgotten at this or any time. We want to ease the sense of isolation, listen to one another share fears and tears, ease financial burdens, and supply food and hope we are able.

This season of Lent, though we may still have access to many of life's pleasures, living comfortably with well-stocked pantries, home libraries, games and entertainment (thank God for YouTube and Netflix), the COVID-19 virus has exposed us as vulnerable and not the masters of our own destinies. It is like we've had a death in the family and life is suddenly changed, and the future made less clear, more fearful. We are harshly reminded that we are truly dust, and to dust we shall return.

Despite these troubled times we have not been abandoned by God. His promises are as sure as ever, and even more significant in this time. This is a grave time for us all; but Jesus has conquered the grave, and we are still free to worship him this morning in small groups, or as family, even as individuals via live streaming. He is with us all, and he has promised never to leave or abandon us. Many Christians in history have suffered far worse and kept the faith. The church will stand.

The experience of Mary and Martha, the grief and turmoil of their brother's death following a brief illness, is known and feared by many of us. This is a family whom Jesus loved, and who loved him, yet Jesus did not spare them from tragedy. This raised some doubt and anger, as it surely would for us if in the same situation, and perhaps for us now in the circumstance of our current troubles.

However, Jesus didn't stay away, he didn't shy away from visiting a region where people sought his life, nor did he shy away from suffering and pain. Jesus entered into that family's turmoil, himself deeply saddened and moved by his friend's death, for he saw a greater picture, one whereby sickness and death would ultimately be defeated. Despite knowing the pain and disappointment of his friends, and despite his own love of Lazarus, Jesus was able to say plainly to his disciples, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe." The miracles

of Jesus recorded in the gospel of John are written with this purpose: that we might believe in Him (as you can read in the final verses of chapter 20).

On arriving near Bethany, Jesus has a wonderful conversation with Martha who goes out to meet him. The conversation is on belief. Martha, says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” She expresses confidence in Jesus even now, though she doesn’t use the close relational expression of the note earlier sent Jesus — “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” Though there is a little distancing, even now despite disappointment, Martha believes that the God of Israel is with Jesus. And Jesus goes on to draw out even greater faith and understanding in Martha and all who read this gospel.

Jesus teaches us all when he says Lazarus will rise again. Martha believes in the day of resurrection. And that is not dissimilar to many people who believe in an after-life, reincarnation, or even the raising of the dead on the day of Judgement. Sure, these are not all the same, but all these ideas share one common absence – the confession of Jesus as Lord and Messiah. Our hope is not in a general belief in a resurrection and afterlife, but specifically in the one who came to save us, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Jesus declares the revelation of his coming into the world — “ I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and never die.”

“Do you believe this?” he asks, and Martha responds in one of the fullest and clearest confessions of faith recorded in Scripture:

“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Jesus declares, “ I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and never die.” Jesus asks you today in your lounge room or study, in this time of anxiety and uncertainty, perhaps a time for you of great isolation, loss and grief – Jesus asks, “ Do you believe this?”

Praise God for your confession of Him, the confession shared by the church of all time and places. But for those yet to believe, Jesus continues to teach. Martha tells her sister Mary, “The Teacher is calling for you.” And we all continue to learn as Jesus engages Mary, and the Jews who were with her in her sorrow. He doesn’t dismiss her pain and her fears, but he himself expresses deep emotion and tears of his own — a powerful mystery and expression of God’s compassion and love not only for Mary and Lazarus, but for all of us who are troubled by death — all expressed in the shortest verse of the Bible: “And Jesus wept.”

Jesus wept real tears. He understands our frailty, our humanness, despite being fully God; and being fully God, his tears are not tears of despair and powerlessness, but of empathy sharing our pain, of his divine compassion which reaches into our situation and acts to assist us. He weeps for the lost and sorrowing but he also calls for them — calling them by his Spirit, through the Word, through his followers — calling them to believe.

Jesus asks for the stone to be rolled away from the cave tomb, despite protests that Lazarus was dead for some four days already, his spirit gone, his body decomposing. For the sake of those in earshot, and for us too, Jesus prays to his Father saying, “...so that they may believe that you sent me.” Then in a loud voice, he commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb. He commands with the same divine voice and authority that called the world into being out of nothingness.

Lazarus came out wearing grave cloths — his hands and feet still bound by strips of cloth. Jesus asks for them to be removed and to let him go. That is, for Lazarus to go freely unhindered. How we desire to go forth from our homes unhindered. How we look forward to coming out of our graves, no longer restricted by laws enforced because of the pandemic. We wait for that day, but even while currently confined and restrained from normal daily life, we are able to worship and to

learn from Jesus. He has called us already out of the grave of unbelief to faith. Like Lazarus alive and no longer bound, our thanks and praise, our empathy, our prayers and other acts of compassion need not be hindered.

Go on and live the life that Jesus has won for you and empowered you with — live it in contrast to the world, shine in this time of fear and darkness. Stay connected to the Lord through the Word and prayer and serving one another. Be guided to new ways of showing empathy and compassion in this new reality of COVID-19. This temporary reality does not overpower or disable the eternal reality of Christ in you.

Now may God who has brought you to faith in Jesus, the one whom he sent who is with us and who is coming still, also give you comfort, peace and resurrection life — now and always. Amen.