

Sermon for March 29, 2020

This weekend, as I had the tv on for news, the channel finished their scheduled news events, and began to play a recorded basketball game – the finals of the NCAA mens final four from 2008 from San Antonio. As I looked at the logo painted on the floor of the court – a cowboy hat with NCAA and 2008 all entwined, I had a moment. I know that logo. Then I remembered. I have that logo on a cushion seat in my closet – it's a souvenir from that series. My late husband, Gary Hoenshell, and his brother Keith went to that final four event in San Antonio in 2008. He loved college basketball. And so, all at once, I was awash in grief. Gary has been dead for nearly 10 years, but there it was – all from the broadcasting of a basketball game from 12 years ago.

We live in interesting times. I am recording this sermon for you all today, as we are in the midst of the Covid-19 Coronavirus pandemic. It is March, 2020. My morning routine begins every day with CBS news telling me how many thousands are diagnosed with Covid-19 as of now, and how many have died. We are surely in a time when grief is real for us. The anxiety you are feeling, even a large amount of the 'cabin fever' from self isolating at this time is part of your own grief.

And so our Gospel appointed for March 29th- the 5th Sunday in Lent is the account in John's Gospel of the raising of Lazarus. A miracle story, to be sure, but a story of grief for our times. I hope you have read John 11:1-45 before watching this, or listened to the recording of the reading of the gospel which my spouse and I made. Because it's a good story. It's a story of friendship, and life and death.

Jesus' life hasn't got a lot of minutia accounted for. In John, we have miracles, teaching, and then the road to his death and resurrection. We don't have stories about family meals or leisure activities. But, in John we find out Jesus has friends. Not just disciples, or followers. Friends. The family from Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem, made up of 3 siblings – Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus. I wish we had more information about how their friendship began, and flourished, but we know the friendship is a real thing.

This friendship, this relationship is not an afterthought. John the gospel writer includes it for us for a reason. Remember – John's purpose in writing this gospel is for us to draw others near to the light – to help others know Jesus and find their lives enriched and given meaning in God's love. So, this friendship is here for us to learn, to come alongside. To realize that our relationships are important, more than important, our relationships are about God's love.

And so we come to the death of Lazarus. Death is a real thing. I have experienced the death of someone I love many times so far in my life. And, experienced the fear, and concern about the possibility of the death of those close to me. I'm pretty sure you have too. And yet, I deny the death that comes so near to me. I still remember how shocked I was a year or so ago when Nita Porter died, a member of my church. She died suddenly as she was in her home having breakfast. A neighbor came in and found her. She was vital, and active, and fun, and then she was gone. Why am I telling you this?

Let's go back to Jesus, and his very good friends Lazarus, Mary and Martha. Lazarus is very sick and the sisters contact Jesus to come. He doesn't. It's clearly a choice, not an oversight. And then he dies, and Jesus finds out. He journeys there, and Martha comes out to meet him. If you had been here, my brother would not have died. She's mad. She's resentful. She's disappointed. Jesus says, Your brother will rise again.' ²⁴Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.'

And that's when he says it I am the resurrection and the life Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' ²⁷She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

I've preached this text at a quite a few memorial services and graveside services. I think I preached it at Nita's. Because, when we are being honest with ourselves we know very well how Martha feels. Death, and grief are things we are well acquainted with. During this time of Covid-19 epidemic I think we are feeling it even more often, in the daily reports, in the isolation from friends, family and coworkers. Feel the grief, friends, its safe to do so, but feel God's love for you as well, The Love Jesus has for his friend Lazarus, who he raises from death to life. The love for Martha and Mary as he comforts them in their grief. We are in a time where grief is quite real. And so is God's love, and as John's Gospel shows us, God's light and love is a reality to which we can bring others, to enrich their lives, to make life more than grief, or fear. We are resurrection people even in these days. Love each other, my friends. Amen

We have included a piece of palm frond for each family today! I know it's not very big, but it's "Envelope Sized"

Please think about waving your palm frond as you read or listen to the Processional Gospel (Matthew 21:1-11) Appointed for April 5, 2020

¹When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." ⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

⁵"Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" ¹¹The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."