

## **“Late for the Funeral”**

**John 11:1-44**

*Series: Face to Face with Jesus Week 5*

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Our Valentine’s Day was a little different this year. A friend and ministry partner had passed away the week before and February 14<sup>th</sup> was the day the family scheduled the memorial service. We made our plans to leave in time to give us 30 to 40 minutes for the viewing and then stay for the service. We were at a light a half mile from home, waiting for the car in front of us to make a left turn, when we suddenly felt our car lurch forward. The person behind us had decided not to wait. I quickly made sure Michelle was ok and moved my own neck and shoulders about and determined I was in no pain either. I got out of the car and found the other driver was ok as well. We began to exchange information when a Lower Makefield patrol car pulled up. It was very cold that morning so he suggested we get back in our cars and he would pull together the information to file an accident report. We sat in the car and waited, looking at our watches watching the time pass by, and I knew; we were going to be late for the funeral.

I don’t like being late. There are exceptions. I’m probably not going to be the first one at a party, although I may be the last to leave. And if I have a couple of networking events that overlap, I’ll often leave one early and arrive late to the other. But when it’s a meeting or a dinner and even a church service, I like to be on time. Author Eric Jerome Dickey said, “Early is on time, on time is late and late is unacceptable.” I especially don’t like when I am late for a wedding or a funeral. To keep a family waiting at such an emotional time just seems disrespectful to me. And yet as we read this week’s passage, we discover Jesus is late for a funeral. Really late!

Today we examine John 11:1-44, The Death of Lazarus.

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup> (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) <sup>3</sup> So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.” <sup>4</sup> When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” <sup>5</sup> Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. <sup>6</sup> So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, <sup>7</sup> and then he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.” John 11:1-7.

Jesus is late to the funeral by choice. He learns Lazarus was sick, and what is his response? Let’s wait a couple of days. And remember, he couldn’t hop a jet, train or even a car to get there quickly. They have to walk. So why? A teaching moment perhaps?

<sup>11</sup> After he had said this, he went on to tell them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.” <sup>12</sup> His disciples replied, “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.” <sup>13</sup> Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. <sup>14</sup> So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, <sup>15</sup> and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” John 11:11-15

Earlier in his ministry, Jesus raises two others from the dead. He raises the widow’s son and Jarius’ daughter. These two were dead for short periods of time prior to Jesus’s act. While we see the miracles, somebody could perhaps claim they weren’t really dead. Remember, medicine wasn’t the same 2000 years ago as it is today. A coma or other kind of sleep might have been considered dead. By arriving four days after Lazarus dies, we see there is no doubt.

His delay is even more shocking because he loves this family so deeply. Verse 5 tells us how Jesus felt about them:

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus - John 11:5

As Mary and Martha encounter Jesus, they react and say roughly the same thing:

“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” John 11:21-22

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. <sup>34</sup> “Where have you laid him?” he asked. “Come and see, Lord,” they replied. John 11:32-34

Mary and Martha both have a strong faith in Jesus and know who he is. Both state he could have saved Lazarus. Martha even adds God will still give Jesus what he needs.

But they both also ask the same thing each one of us has probably asked God at some point –

**Where are you God?!**

Not getting what you need/deserve at work or school?

**Where are you God?** I’ve been faithful to you.

Your prayers aren’t being answered in the way you expect?

**Where are you God?** You said you’d answer my prayers!

Hurt in an accident?

**Where are you God?** You said you’d be there for me.

Lost a child?

Where are you God? I've been there. We lost our son, Jimmy, to an overdose 5 ½ years ago. At some point I asked, "Where are you God?" And he showed me. He was there when ministry brothers and sisters came over to comfort us. He sent Pastor Doug over to see what we needed. Many of you here showed your love through cards, food, and your presence. We saw God in every one of you then. And throughout the whole time, and since, you've been here – with us.

God doesn't leave us. Maybe the distance you have wandered makes it seem he has. Perhaps you are not seeing how God places the people in your life. Maybe he is working in a way you don't expect. But he is there for us when we turn to him.

All right. I'm going to do a little public service work right now. One of the things I have struggled with is memorizing scripture. I've memorized some. I know John 3:16, who doesn't, and I can repeat my life verse – Matthew 6:27, "Who of you by worrying can add one hour to his life?" So, if you who struggle with this, I'm going to give you some homework this week and see if you can memorize John 11:35. Ready? Here goes:

Jesus wept. - John 11:35

Say it with me. And again. One more time. Now, close your eyes and say it from memory.

Good! Memorization isn't so hard, is it?

The question is, why did Jesus weep? We weep when we lose a loved one because we know we won't see them anymore. Jesus knows he is going to raise Lazarus and will see him again.

So why does he weep? It's simple. Jesus' weeping shows God grieves with us. He is a compassionate God. Mary and Martha are grieving at the loss of their brother. The others who are there are also weeping. As it said in verse 33, "that troubled Jesus." It brings us back to the question, "Where are you God?" He is there, at the gravesite, with us as we weep.

Each of us can act as God does at these times. I've heard many people say they don't know what to say at a funeral. You often don't have to say anything. Hug them. Tell them you love them. Weep with them. If you know them well enough, you'll talk later. And if you don't say anything, it's hard to say something wrong. Just grieve with them and show compassion.

And then there is the miracle.

<sup>38</sup> Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. <sup>39</sup> "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

<sup>40</sup> Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

<sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. <sup>42</sup> I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." <sup>43</sup> When he had said

this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”<sup>44</sup> The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” – John 11:38-44

For four days Lazarus is dead. And yet Jesus raises him up and brings him back to the living. Unfortunately, we can’t do that. Or can we?

A couple weeks ago Doug spoke about Nicodemus, and about being born again. Once by our mother and once by the spirit. We cannot give life to a person – but as we see in these passages, Jesus gives us the opportunity to help. He tells the people to “Take away the stone”, and “Take off the grave clothes.” Those are things we can do in our interactions with the people around us. Share your faith with others. Growth groups aren’t just for members of Woodside. All should be invited. Invite a friend, co-worker, or neighbor to a service during Easter week.

Start thinking of a project you can suggest for June 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> for “The Church Has Left the Building. Remove the stone that is a barrier to someone’s faith. Help take off their grave clothes.

In the 15 years since I was born again, I’ve preached at Woodside, in a Philadelphia prison and on city streets in the Dominican Republic. But I had never tried to share my faith with a non-believer at the end of their life. Last September we found out my Uncle Dwight’s cancer had spread rapidly and was no longer treatable. He decided he wanted to go back to his home of 91 years, rather than a nursing facility. I drove up to Boston to give my older brother Rick, a break for a couple of days, help the caregivers and hospice nurses, and say my goodbyes. While I made the six-hour drive, I prayed to God for a way to share my faith with him and get him to accept Jesus in his life.

When I got there, Rick met me downstairs and gave me a summary of all what was happening and then we went up to see him. The three of us talked a bit and then Rick had to leave the room to take a phone call. My uncle reached out to me and asked me to come closer. He then told me God had come to him the week before at the hospital and told him he loved him. As my uncle cried, he said, “and I love him too.” He then shared over the past 10 years he had wondered why I had gotten so - What was the word he used? - “weird” about my faith. He said he now understood and wished he had known Jesus longer. Over the next couple of days we talked, prayed, and cried. I went home after a few days, and he passed away the following week. When I spoke at his graveside service a couple of months later, I grieved, and cried with my family. But I also know he is with the Lord, and I will see him again.