

Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 24;  
Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-45

This morning was a reminder for me not to get too comfortable. You see, I knew about the change of time, and I knew I had an extra hour to get here, but I always get confused with this hour change. Still, on my way here, I glanced down at the clock on the radio, and it said ten to eight. I panicked, until I realized it was only ten to seven.

So, equally challenging for me is this text from the Gospel of John, and it always seems to do that to me; this Gospel always stretches my thinking, always forces me to take what I read in a different way.

What we are faced with here in this section of the Gospel is a cut-out from the raising of Lazarus in the book of John. You maybe noticed that we started with verse 32, but the account we're given about Mary's encounter with Jesus is only part of the story. When we read from verse 32, you and I are thrown directly into the midst of a grief situation; a grief that occurs with the loss of a loved one. Mary's brother Lazarus is dead.

The story really begins, however, at the beginning of chapter 11, where we read that Jesus hears about Lazarus being ill. Why didn't Jesus go right away? Could he not have displayed the glory of God, His own divinity, and even impressed us, by healing Lazarus when he was close to death? I don't know the answer to that question, but for whatever reason, he delays; Jesus waits before going to Bethany until after Lazarus dies.

But during this waiting period, we get to hear about a conversation that occurs between Jesus and His disciples. Jesus announces that he is ready to go to Judea finally, and this time the disciples try to stop him. They try to talk him out of it. You see, just before this account, Jesus is almost stoned to death, and now He wants to go back.

Why face that? The disciples talk with one another, and in discussion Thomas speaks up and says, "If you are going there Jesus, then let us go with you so that we may die with you."

So He goes, and we assume the disciples go with Him, but we don't hear about them for the rest of this account, this story. We read that Jesus is on the outskirts of Bethany; for whatever reason he does not enter the town. Maybe he sees the grief; maybe he is surprised that so many other people are there, when he expects to find only Mary and Martha, his good friends. So he waits. Again.

But there are people there; there are people who are grieving with Mary and Martha. They're members of the community; they're there for support, and they cry also. But Martha hears that Jesus is close, so she goes to Him. Remember – this happens before what we read today. Martha goes to him first and says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." It's the same thing Mary says in our reading today! But here Martha says a little more. She also

says, “But even now, Jesus, I know that whatever you ask from the Father it will be given to you.” I think, in one way, Martha here proclaims great faith. Or perhaps she is challenging Jesus to do something; perhaps she has an ulterior motive. We don’t know.

But we find out in verses 25 and 26, what Jesus says to her. He says, “I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never really die.” And then Jesus asks Martha, “Do you believe this?” And you and I are asked this question each day also.

Martha answers, “Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” And then Martha leaves to go find her sister Mary; she tells her that Jesus is close, and He calls her.

Just like Martha, Mary goes to see Jesus. But this time, others follow. This time those that are grieving with Mary and Martha go with her. The people that are there are in support, and they think that Mary is going to the burial place of Lazarus to cry. So now we are brought up to our text this morning, and we hear Mary say, “Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died.” But she does something different than Martha, she falls at the feet of Jesus, and she weeps. The others who came with her are weeping also. At this time, Jesus becomes greatly disturbed and deeply moved. Why did Jesus weep?

There is a movie I watched recently called *Mr. Holland’s Opus*. Mr. Holland, if you don’t know the story, is a composer of music, and is a little down on his luck. He decides to fall back on his teaching degree to earn some income, and he figures that he’ll have a lot of free time since teachers only work a few hours a day, and there’s not much planning after, so he’ll be able to work on his composition. You know, kind of go through the motions of being a teacher while his real focus, his heart, will be on composing.

Needless to say, his first day is a disaster. In fact, the first six months of his teaching career is a disaster because he tries to teach music from a textbook. But soon after, he finds that he can connect his students’ love for music to his love for music. Of course, their music is rock and roll, but his teaching is nevertheless now focused on where the students are, and they then respond with passion.

Years pass by. Soon it’s 1996 and much like today, school budgets get cut and among the first things to go are the music and the arts programs. They’re removed; schools become a business focused on profit and test scores and competition between one school and another, instead of the focus being put on learning. Passionate teachers who love to teach are removed from this love by having to spend more and more time filling out paperwork, justifying test scores, and other documentation; the passion is snuffed out.

The music department, as I said, is the first to get cut. The school board has simply decided that the arts are unimportant. Mr. Holland is fired, terminated, given the axe. He looks back at his life. He never composed the music he hoped to compose. He’s been fired. It seems like his life has been a waste. His plan long ago was to write music, but he didn’t do it. Instead, he fell in

love with teaching, and then came his termination. The profession he came to love has all but killed his spirit.

So after he finishes cleaning out his desk in the music room, thinking of all the years he spent there, and as he's leaving the building, he hears music. He goes to investigate, and as he opens the auditorium doors, and there he's faced with a crowd that stands and cheers as he enters.

The camera goes through the crowd, and we recognize some of the people from the story. Hard cases. Children who came with problem lives who Mr. Holland touched, and who turned their lives around. Students all grown up. But most of all, we see that Mr. Holland's life was not a waste. None of our lives are a waste. At this point in the movie, I can't help but cry, but it's such a good feeling. My son looked at me and said, "Why are you crying? It's not sad." Yet the tears were there.

People cry for all sorts of reasons. Why did Jesus weep that day?

I'd like to share with you a conversation I had a few years ago with a member of my congregation in Florida. He's no longer a member, but I'll never forget the talk we had. You see, he had left the church, and one day I had the chance to ask him why. He told me something I'll never forget. He said, "Well, one Sunday morning I came to church. The pastor came out for the announcements, and he told the congregation he was sorry to announce the death of one of its members." Like you, I waited for something more. I know I've put my foot in my mouth on many occasions, so I was waiting for the pastor to say something else. When the man realized that I didn't quite get what he was saying, he told me he could not believe in a pastor who would apologize for the announcement of a death. He wondered how the pastor could believe in eternal life, if he was sorry to announce a death? So he left the church.

Yet here we're told that Jesus wept. Did Jesus have doubts about eternal life? I don't think so. Did he have fear of his own death? Maybe. Or perhaps he was suddenly surrounded by a large group of people who were grieving, and that caused him to weep. Maybe he realized that even performing a miracle (raising someone from the dead) would not be enough to take away death from our future.

All of these things would undoubtedly make me sad, would make me cry, but I'm not Jesus. And I need to be careful not to place my feelings upon him. These are not what brings Jesus to weep in the gospel of John. I believe that Jesus weeps because He knows that the people in that group, and people today, will only believe if they see a miracle.

But a miracle should never be the only reason for our belief. For those who need a miracle, and that includes me, for all of us, who believe only in a miracle means that we will always focus on that miracle, only. So I challenge you, try not to focus only on the raising of Lazarus as we encounter All Saints Day today; as we remember our loved ones, our friends and our families; as we pray for them and we remember their lives – not because they were perfect for they were saints and sinners – but still loved by God. Just like you, saints and sinners, loved by God.

I have come to know some of these names in the short time I've been here, and I grieve with you and I want to tell you that I love you, just as all the pastoral staff here loves you, and our music director Tim Koch loves you, and Judy Collins, and Christopher Couch, and all the staff love you. And if we love you, how much more does God love you?

It's normal for us to be focused on the raising of Lazarus, but the reality is that what Jesus Christ can do, and did, is for each of us. So move beyond the miracle. See that, like Martha and Mary and all the friends who have gathered to grieve, we all have choices, we all have decisions in life to make.

John 3:17 "God did not send His Son to the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved." You and I, we are already saved. But we falter, and we can reject Christ in our words and our actions. There were people in that crowd who rejected Jesus. They ended up going to the Pharisees and immediately we learn that the plot to arrest and kill Jesus begins. And the irony is that while they plotted to remove Jesus from the living, they were actually fulfilling God's plan to remove the power of sin from the world.

Dear friends, death no longer has dominion and power over us. Thanks be to God.

Amen.