

A Service of Gathering Around Our Losses
From John 11

He got there too late. I imagine Jesus thought he had time. He never thought Lazarus would die that fast. He'd wanted to be there, to have a final conversation with his old friend; to offer companionship and comfort to Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters. They were his friends too. If he'd known Lazarus was that sick, if he'd planned better, if he hadn't gotten caught up with people who said they needed him, he might have gotten there in time. He might have made it a good death, the kind of death you'd want for someone you love, with family and friends all around; slow, thoughtful conversation about how sweet life has been.

It hardly ever happens that way, that scene we have in our minds from movies or books. When someone we love dies, it is always too soon. We didn't say all that we wanted to. We never did find that one more way to say 'I love you,' or 'Thank you.' It's a rare thing for someone to slip away peacefully. In the end, the body grasps for one more breath. It too is reluctant to give up life.

When Jesus does get to the place where Lazarus lived, things are a little rocky. Martha meets him first, at the gate. Her first words to Jesus sound like an accusation: 'If you had been here, he wouldn't have died.' Ouch.

'He will rise,' Jesus says to her.
Uh-huh.

You know Martha. She's the practical one, the one who knew that whether it was Jesus who was visiting or Uncle Joe, she had to get dinner on the table. So when Jesus says, 'I am resurrection and life; whoever believes in me will never die,' I wonder what Martha is thinking. 'Do you believe me?' Jesus asks her. 'Yes,' she says. 'Of course I believe you.' But I bet she doesn't understand at all. Who could understand Jesus calling himself resurrection, promising that there will be no death for those who believe? Her brother *already* died. People die, even people who believe. What are you trying to say here, Jesus?

Jesus walks in a little further in; and Mary, Lazarus' other sister, comes and finds him. Her grief too comes out like anger pointed at Jesus. She says the same words Martha did: 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died.'

Imagine the scene. Their recrimination, their grief, piled on top of his own. He is not just a miracle-worker; he is a human being. And his dear friend has died. It's too much. Jesus cries. The healer, the teacher, the One sent by God, the one who never flinches when things get hard, sits down right there on the ground and he weeps. He feels the weight of the world in that moment. So many deaths, so much sadness. Who can take it all in?

I know that feeling.
You know that feeling.

But Jesus has work to do. So after a few minutes he stands up again and he walks—trudges, maybe—toward the cave where Lazarus’ body had been laid down, buried. Where it has been for four days, actually.

‘Remove the stone,’ he says to the people who have gathered around to see what would happen next.

‘It’s going to smell really bad,’ Martha says.
Thank you, Martha.

A few of the strong men put their shoulders to the rock that covers the hollowed-out cave, and they push. The tomb is open. It probably did smell.

Jesus has collected himself now, and he calls out in a loud and clear voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’
And he does.

A person walks out of the cave. He’s all wrapped up in cloths—arms, legs, head—this is how all bodies were wrapped after death; but they’d know that sturdy body anywhere. It’s Lazarus. I imagine it was bone quiet for a minute. Completely silent, all eyes on this mummy-like figure standing with his back to the dark cave, his front facing the sun. No one moves. What do you do when a miracle happens before your very eyes?

It’s Jesus who speaks first. ‘Unbind him,’ he says. ‘Untie those cloths and let him go. Set him free.’

Lazarus is the one who is called out of the tomb, raised from the dead, called back into life. Jesus did that. I’m pretty sure *only* Jesus could do that. But it’s the people around Lazarus who are called to do something more. If Lazarus is going to live again, they have a job to do: to unbind this man who breathes again, free him from the ways they’ve wrapped him up for safe-keeping. Only the people around him can do that—his family and friends and neighbors.

Why didn’t Jesus finish the job himself? Not too many chapters later in the Gospel of John, Jesus will unwrap his own burial cloths and leave them behind on Easter morning. Surely he could have done the entirety of the Lazarus miracle without help from the crowd.

But maybe Jesus knew something about those people—about us—even before we know it ourselves. Maybe he knew that resurrection is a big concept—so big, we’ll probably never understand what it means, no matter what we believe, or try to believe. Like Martha, what we know is what we can see; beyond that, we trust and hope, and we’re never quite sure. And in the meantime, while we are not understanding completely, there is work to do.

To hold with us the ones who have died. And then, to unbind the living. To lift up and offer comfort to the ones who are grieving; to carry them for a while if that’s what they need.

To you who have lost someone dear to you—I think this is what your loved one would do if they could. They would come alongside you, you who are missing them terribly. They would put a

hand on your back and whisper in your ear, “It’s OK. I’m still here, and I’m OK. You will be OK too.”

And when you cannot hear them say that, *we* will stand in their place. We will stay with you until the binding cloths that hold your grief are loosened. This is what a community does. This is how we care for one another.

In 2005, while Hurricane Katrina was ripping through New Orleans, a woman named Vera Smith was killed by a hit-and-run driver. The police were overwhelmed that week; they had no time to respond to calls to retrieve the body of someone who was already dead. So Vera’s body laid by the side of the road for five days. Finally, her neighbors saw that no help would be coming from anywhere else. So they gathered together. They brought soil and rocks and bricks from an empty lot, and they made a temporary grave for her, right there, on the corner of the street. While they worked, they told each other stories about Vera—how she had moved to New Orleans from Mexico with her husband. They remembered how readily she laughed. ‘We knew her,’ they were saying with their actions. ‘She belonged to us.’ⁱ

When I served the congregation in Campbell, I watched West African customs around death. Whenever a member of the community died, they would gather spontaneously, sit with the family, sometimes for days; share food and stories and sadness. In the Jewish tradition it’s called *sitting shiva*. For seven evenings, people gather in the home of the family that has lost a parent or child or spouse, simply to be together, to join the family in prayer and grief. If you’ve watched the new musical *In the Heights*, you saw it in a Latino neighborhood in New York. When one family’s *Abuela*, its grandmother, died, dozens of people gathered with lit candles outside, on the porch and in the street; just to be there, to mark their connection with one family that was suffering its loss.

Some of the most beautiful moments in life happen when death cracks us open enough to come alongside each other in this way, to join another’s loss as if it were our own. This is the work we have been given to do. For a little while the pandemic kept us from doing it, but we have not forgotten. Like so many things, now we begin again.

ⁱ From *The Good Funeral*, by Thomas G. Long and Thomas Lynch