

An Encounter With Jesus

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[0 : 00] Morning. Let me just pray quickly. Lord Jesus, we invite you now to come pour out your spirit upon us to draw close to us. And we thank you. Amen.

It's a cheery note that this morning's gospel reading ends on. I'm going to speak to the whole chapter. I don't want anybody to be left hanging that this is the punchline for the sermon. Let's go follow Jesus and die with him. There's more to this chapter. This message this morning is a great passage. John is a great storyteller. He's a master of literary devices. When I was in seminary, I kind of decided John was my favorite gospel because of this, because he is such a good storyteller. And anytime a writer of a gospel slows down the narrative, it's a signal for us that we should slow down too and pay close attention.

That's what's happening in John 11. So Tommy preached a message on John 11 at a service of a lament a few weeks ago. If it was recorded, I'd go give it a listen. It was great.

[1 : 12] This morning's message is about how Jesus was encountered by Martha and Mary, Lazarus, his disciples, and even by his critics. It's also a passage that's highly relevant to healing prayer, a new ministry offering here at Advent.

And I say this because healing prayer is always about encountering Jesus. And I tell people that the goal of healing prayer, whether it's inner or emotional healing or physical healing, is that people walk away feeling loved.

And today's passage has three acts like all good dramas. Absence, presence, and resurrection. So, act one, absence. This drama opens by setting the scene.

Lazarus, a close friend of Jesus, is sick with a deadly illness. And Lazarus' sisters, who are also close friends of Jesus, ask him to come help.

And in this first act, there are two groups of people who experience Jesus. Mary and Martha and Jesus' disciples. I want to talk about Mary and Martha first.

[2 : 20] They're not explicitly mentioned. They don't show up in this first part, but they're there. And their experience of Jesus is as silent and absent. It's one of the hardest moments of their lives.

Their brother died. He's sick, and he's on the verge of death. And they call upon Jesus. They send him a message asking him for help. In effect, they pray to Jesus, come help.

While John doesn't say one way or another for sure, Jesus doesn't seem to answer them. He doesn't send a message back to them or in any way even acknowledge their message.

He's silent in response to their cries for help. And equally hard, Jesus doesn't answer their prayer in substance. Martha and Mary ask Jesus to come heal their brother, and he doesn't.

What's already a painful and grief-filled moment for Martha and Mary is made worse by Jesus' silence and absence. The reason they sent a message to Jesus in the first place is because they knew him.

[3 : 27] They knew what he was like and what he could do. They knew he eagerly wants to heal and that he can heal anything. And so to send a message in faith and confidence that their friend would come and heal their brother like they knew he would, and then for Jesus not to come would have been very difficult.

I tried to imagine what they were telling Lazarus during this moment while he was ill. They were probably telling him things like, don't worry, we sent for Jesus. It's going to be okay. Hold tight. And then as they watched Lazarus get more and more sick and decline, as Lazarus got worse, there was no word from Jesus.

He wasn't showing up. This was devastating. Devastating to watch their brother for sure, but also as they struggled to know what to say, what answer to give him when he said, is he here yet?

What hope to give? And then he died. It would be hard to quantify the depth and severity of pain that Martha and Mary felt at that moment. When deep suffering sets upon us, and suffering is a thing that does befall us, everything gets thrown into question.

[4 : 44] We thought Jesus was our friend, that he cared about us. So why didn't he respond? We thought Jesus was the most loving and kind person we've ever met, maybe ever.

And that limitless power works through him for good. So what happened? Is he not that kind or good? Was this too much for him and his power?

What if Jesus isn't who he said he is? And if that's true, maybe God isn't either. For any of us who have suffered deeply, even traumatically, we even question whether anything is good, whether life, the universe, or reality.

Suffering in the silence and absence of God is what Fleming Rutledge calls godless. The silence and absence of God in suffering carries with it the sense that we're over here, in our pain, apart from God, and that God is over here, with all who he says he is, and everything he made, and everything he's supposed to be about.

It carries with it the sense that our pain and suffering is actually what's most real. In this first act, we see Martha and Mary.

[6 : 00] We hear about them. We know what's going on with them. But we also see Jesus as disciples and their experience with him. In this first act, we hear, we learn some things about what's happening on Jesus' side from what John says and what Jesus says.

One thing John tells us is that although Jesus loved the sisters and Lazarus, he chose to stay put. It's kind of interesting. It's an interesting phrase. It's one of the few times when John explicitly says about Jesus that he loves someone.

In most of his gospel, he shows Jesus' love by what he says to people and how he interacts with them. Jesus staying put in those circumstances was significant enough for John that he had to go out of his way to underscore, despite how it looks, Jesus did love his friends.

And he underscored this not just by stating this explicitly, but by naming each of these friends individually when he said so. John wanted us to see this and have this in mind.

Jesus also tells his disciples a few things. When the news of Lazarus' illness arrives, he says it won't lead to death, but will bring glory to God and to the Son of God.

[7 : 17] And then later he says he's going to go wake up Lazarus, a euphemism referring to Lazarus' death. Despite all that, despite even how Jesus comes out and says explicitly, Lazarus died, the disciples just aren't tracking with him.

John tells us as his readers that Jesus loved his friends, even though he stayed put, which was confusing. And that creates this disconnect between us and the disciples.

What we are told, the disciples don't seem to understand. And worse, they're not focusing on what Jesus is trying to focus on, about Lazarus' illness and going to wake him up.

What they do focus on is what Jesus said, which was eventually, let's go to Judea. So he can wake up Lazarus, but the disciples only hear, let's go to Judea.

And they have a freak out moment. Their immediate response is, why are you doing that? Why would you go there? There are people there trying to kill you. And when they decide as a group, it is time to go, Thomas says, the verse we ended the passage on, let's go too so we can die with him.

[8 : 27] So I always like to imagine the disciples in these little moments, somebody should have looked at Thomas and kind of said to him, enough with the good ideas today, Thomas. I kind of liked you better when you were doubting, Thomas, you're quieter.

The thing that the disciples missed was that Jesus said Lazarus' illness would bring glory to God and the Son of God. We should pause on this for a sec. What's Jesus saying?

What does he mean? Why would he even say this? It's probably good to say maybe what Jesus isn't saying. He isn't saying that Lazarus' death isn't a big deal, and therefore it's okay.

He isn't saying that it's okay that Lazarus dies because it's for a good cause. He isn't saying that the illness and eventual death of Lazarus now all make sense and is therefore okay.

Jesus doesn't minimize, trivialize, or dismiss Lazarus' suffering or that of Martha and Mary. And he doesn't offer a clear why that makes it all less painful.

[9 : 31] So what is he saying? When Jesus speaks of God being glorified and the Son of God being glorified, he's speaking of contrasting proportions. When Jesus points to what he's pointing to, when he says the glory of God would be revealed, is he saying that the love and goodness and

beauty and life that is who God is would show forth.

The suffering of Lazarus, what's happening to him, and what's happening to Mary and Martha is great. Jesus doesn't dismiss it. He's just saying that the glory of God is something entirely other and proportionally greater.

Paul kind of gets at this when he writes to the Romans in chapter 8. He says, For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. Paul is not dismissing anybody's sufferings. He's just speaking proportionately. So we don't get an answer about why this is all happening in Jesus' statement or when or even how this is going to happen.

How will God be glorified? We only get the assurance that Jesus will show forth his love and goodness and beauty and life in the midst of and even through and despite what's going on with Lazarus and Mary and Martha.

[10:53] And yes, it will make a difference, even if we don't know how yet. Martha and Mary don't benefit from what Jesus is saying to his disciples and his disciples who do hear all this aren't really getting it either.

They seem to be thinking from a different frame of mind. They miss what Jesus is saying. Jesus is listening to and following his father's leading and it seems beyond his disciples at the moment.

In this first act of John, there's plenty of mystery and plenty of the disciples being still on their own journey with Jesus. Act 2 of this chapter, Jesus does decide to finally go.

He arrives in Bethany and he's found out that the situation is, if possible, is even worse. Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days now. I don't mean to be indelicate, but a body was in the tomb for four days and it's not good.

It's starting to break down. And according to popular Jewish belief, a person's soul was thought to linger for three days after death and then depart, which means in everybody's minds, Lazarus is dead beyond hope.

[12:07] Martha hears Jesus arrived and she goes straight to Jesus and frankly gets straight to the point. If you'd been here, my brother would not have died. Her words carry grief and anger.

Mary comes later. She falls at Jesus' feet and says the same thing, but her words come with a little less anger, maybe more grief in it.

In this act, Jesus is present. He's present to Martha and Mary. There's a couple things that this means. First of all, it means that he's just simply there.

He's with them, simply put. But it also means that he receives. He receives Martha and Mary and their words, and their grief, their confessions of pain, their confusion, their anger, even their accusations, their lament.

He receives them in everything they bring, without condition, without reservation or restriction. Nothing is not allowed. Martha and Jesus have a bit more of an extended conversation than Jesus and Mary.

[13:14] For me, incredibly, in the midst of her pain, she still believes that God will give Jesus whatever he asks. And then Jesus offers something else that comes with his presence, words.

Jesus responds to her like he did to his disciples earlier, probably for the simple fact that like the twelve, Martha is his disciple too. And he takes her as a person and as his follower seriously, and he takes her suffering seriously too.

Like he did earlier with the disciples, he invites Martha to a deeper place in himself, a deeper place of knowing who he is and what he's like for her in the midst of her deepest pain.

Jesus says, Lazarus will live again. But Martha doesn't quite catch what Jesus means. She thinks that he means Lazarus will rise and the general resurrection in the afterlife.

But Jesus presses her to believe something more about himself right here and right now. That believing in Jesus means overcoming death. And when he asks Martha, do you believe this?

[14:20] She makes a confession about him that actually exceeds Peter's best confession anywhere in the Gospels. Martha's an amazing person. And Jesus draws out of Martha's hurting heart during this time of deepest suffering a new level of faith in himself.

But even so, as readers, we hear Jesus' words to Martha about him being the resurrection and the life, and we know there's more to it than what Martha is confessing in that moment.

And there's one more thing Jesus brings when he brings his presence. He brings his feelings, his emotions. We have to know when reading about Jesus' emotions during this chapter how invested

he is in Martha and Mary and their experience.

We have to understand that he's not just with Martha and Mary, he is going through it with them. The emotion Jesus feels when he sees Mary weeping and the Jews who came from Jerusalem to weep with Mary is deeply moved in spirit and greatly troubled it's a little sanitized.

The Greek word is *abrimameo mai*. It describes a deep, from the gut exhalation of raw grief and anger. It's not a word that's spoken, it's like an exhalation of deepest raw emotion.

[15:47] And then that exhalation turns into weeping. Jesus being present means he is, means knowing how he feels about us and our pain.

And so what was Jesus crying for? What were his emotions about? Frankly, everything. That Lazarus had to experience sickness and then die, that this ripped up Mary and Martha, that this impacted a whole community with grief, that sickness and death even existed, that people suffered like this at all, and because when God made everything through his son, none of this was supposed to happen, none of this was supposed to be.

Jesus wept because this was all wrong. Jesus being present means he takes our pain and grief and trauma seriously. There's no waving of a magic wand.

Act 3 is a resurrection. This actual, this part of the story, the actual raising of Lazarus from the dead is surprisingly brief.

Jesus tells people there to roll away the stone. Martha objects. Jesus reminds her if she believes, she'll see the glory of God. And so people roll back the stone covering the tomb.

[17:04] Jesus' longest speech part is a prayer to his father. He doesn't ask God to do anything in this prayer. In fact, it seems that Jesus was already praying before this moment because he says, thank you for hearing me.

And I don't know when he was praying, maybe when he was waiting before coming, maybe on his way walking to Bethany, maybe while he was talking to Mary or Martha, maybe when he was weeping. But he had been praying and he now thanks God for hearing him and acknowledges that people are watching.

And he prays that this would make people believe that his father sent him. And then comes the miracle. His words are simple, three words, Lazarus, come out.

So we don't know what happens spiritually in this moment. We don't know what happened once Jesus spoke out loud like that. It was on the surface ordinary speech at an outside gathering in front of a tomb.

It was audacious. It was a high risk thing to say, something that spoke against the grain and flow and way of too much of how things are in the world and life.

[18:12] It was too much for his disciples and Martha to get their heads around in advance. I came across a quote. I'm going to pull it up and I'm going to read it because there's something of the mystery of what I'm talking about in this.

I'm quoting the great theologian Matthew Perry, the actor who played Chandler on Friends. So he wrote a new book. It's not an endorsement of his book. We all love Friends.

The book's probably good but this is Matthew talking about his life and as I think a lot of us know, he struggled deeply with addiction for a long time. So, I'm pulling out a couple passages.

It's worth reading it in its entirety. We're going to pull out a couple parts. At one point, Matthew says, God, please help me. He whispers, God, please help me.

Show me that you are here. God, please help me. And he describes a change coming over him and then he says, I started to cry. I mean, I really started to cry.

[19:13] That shoulder-shaking kind of uncontrollable weeping. I wasn't crying because I was sad. I was crying because for the first time in my life, I felt okay. I felt safe, taken care of.

Decades of struggling with God and wrestling with life and sadness all was being washed away like a river of pain gone into oblivion. I'd been in the presence of God.

Picture Chandler saying this. I'd been in the presence of God. I was certain of it and this time I had prayed for the right thing, help. Eventually, the weeping subsided but everything was different now. I stayed sober for two years based solely on that moment. God had shown me a sliver of what life could be. He'd saved me that day and for all days, no matter what, he had turned me into a seeker, not only of sobriety and truth but also of him.

He doesn't know what happened to him. He just knows that he encountered Jesus. Whatever happened spiritually in this moment in John 11, Jesus' voice went out in the hearing of everyone

watching.

[20 : 27] It went into that tomb, into the stench and darkness and it went down into death and it gave a command that could not be resisted by anything and Lazarus walked out of the tomb alive again.

It just happened and we don't know how. Incredibly to me, John doesn't describe anyone's reaction. He only says that many there believed in Jesus and some, for some, it accelerated their plan to kill him.

It's just grievous to me. How is that possible? They knew a miracle had happened and their response was, wow, that was amazing. We should hurry up our plans to kill him. John never mentions Martha or Mary or even Lazarus' reaction or the disciples' reactions who were there but this time not mentioned.

I think if I was writing it I would have said something like and at that moment everybody just lost their mind. Like it would have, like it was joyous and they were in shock and they said, can you believe what just happened?

We would probably all say, yeah, that was probably what happened. But John, I think, is intentional. He leaves us with this astonishing miracle and then lets us have our own reaction to Jesus and what he did.

[21 : 51] He invites us to go deeper with Jesus in the process. So maybe a couple takeaways at the close of this drama. What are some of the takeaways?

For one, healing prayer doesn't trivialize suffering. Just as Jesus didn't minimize the awfulness or seriousness of Lazarus' death or illness, praying for healing takes the suffering and woundedness of others as seriously as it deserves.

In healing prayer, the silence and absence of Jesus is fully acknowledged. The goal is not to explain away anything or find a why for anything that's happened to anyone. In healing prayer, we sit with the mystery that we don't know how, but Jesus will show forth his love and goodness and beauty and life.

In healing prayer, it's always awaiting on the Lord with others for Jesus to show up and journeying with others when he does. Healing prayer is about presence.

Healing prayer is about inviting Jesus to be present with someone so his words can be heard, his heart can be known, and so people can know that Jesus is there, that he's going through and he went through their suffering with them.

[23 : 09] Healing prayer is about being open to Jesus' invitation for people to come and find more of him and who he is, what he is like at their lowest, darkest, and most painful of experiences.

I have found that there's a place in God that can only be accessed when Jesus meets us in our deepest places of woundedness. It's not because Jesus is mean and withholds himself ordinarily, it's because he gives us an experience of his disproportionately greater glory in the places where we most need it.

It doesn't mean we look for suffering or try and suffer, and it doesn't mean God engineers suffering in order to give us this experience. It just means he responds to what should never have been with more of who he is and what he wants for us.

Lastly, healing prayer receives the resurrection. Sometimes, when you're praying for healing, whether it's inner healing or physical healing, it feels like you're just choosing to roll back the rock of the tomb.

There wasn't a lot of faith in that moment. Martha and others objected, and Jesus said, roll it back, and so they just did. And Jesus and the whole crowd was standing in front of this contradictory data of a dead man, a tomb, days old, a stench, and all heavily resisted faith.

[24 : 32] Martha and the others only had obedience to do what Jesus said, to roll the rock back, but that obedience held enough faith. And a lot of time when we're praying for each other, we pray in the face of contradictory data.

Our prayers come in obedience to Jesus' instructions that we pray for each other, but we always press towards seeing God and his Son be glorified. I have seen some amazing answers to prayer, really amazing.

I've also been painfully disappointed for myself and for others by not receiving answers to prayer. So my prayer is that people would encounter the resurrected Jesus in a prayer time.

And that my experience through amazing highs and hard lows is that when I look back, Jesus has always shown up, and he always does eventually show forth his glory. And so I keep praying. So the healing prayer ministry is new at Advent. I want to invite anyone who wants to pray, who wants people to come pray with them to find Jesus and see how he would draw close to them and mark them with his glory to come seek it out.

[25 : 44] Prayer ministers who come over at the side after services, and if you want to actually set up a time for prayer, contact Hillary. And there are lots of people who would love to come pray with you and see what Jesus would do.

Let me close in prayer. Lord Jesus, we thank you that you offer yourself to us. You promise us that you will show forth your love, your goodness, your beauty, and your life somehow.

And somehow it happens, and sometimes it happens, and we don't even know how it happened. It's just suddenly there. you've done something, and we are grateful.

We want to see you keep doing this. So Lord, we invite you to come draw close to us in those places of pain where we most need to be marked by your glory.

Amen.