

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Fifth Sunday of Lent, April 2, 2017

The Dress Rehearsal
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys
April 2, 2017

John 11:1-45

I borrowed the title of this message from a sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor on the same scripture passage as I am using today. The title is very appropriate because the scripture is about a resurrection, one which occurred not long before the death and resurrection of Jesus.

As was the case last Sunday, today's scripture reading is very long, 45 verses, which is longer than last week's text. The scripture reading is another one-act play, this time a play in four scenes. As I did last week, rather than initially reading this long scripture selection I will intersperse the scripture into my message to make it very clear what each scene is about.

First, let us set the stage for our dress rehearsal. Jesus receives a message from Mary and Martha that his friend Lazarus is ill and asking him to come to Bethany. It would be a very dangerous trip because Bethany really is a suburb of Jerusalem where the Pharisees and Sadducees are plotting against Jesus.

As the story begins, Jesus and the apostles are on the east side of the Jordan River where John had been baptizing earlier. John subsequently had been arrested and beheaded.

Scene 1: "¹ Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² (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.) ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

⁴ 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." ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, ⁷ and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

⁸ "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?"

⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world's light. ¹⁰ It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light."

¹¹ 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."

¹² His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." ¹³ Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

¹⁴ So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

¹⁶ Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Think about Jesus saying "This sickness will not end in death." Lazarus of course did die and when Jesus eventually did raise him, that act compounded the opposition to Jesus and in great measure contributed to his own death.

Jesus gives a clue as to what his words meant when he said, "...it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." Lamar Williamson, Jr. ⁽¹⁾ called, "The raising of Lazarus ... a glorious sign pointing to the resurrection of Jesus ... a manifestation of the splendor and majesty of God."

Jesus does not immediately go to Lazarus and talks about twelve hours of daylight indicating that it is hazardous to travel in the dark. Lamar Williamson, Jr. commented that Jesus realized that he had only a short time remaining on earth and that, over the objection of the apostles, he had to go to Bethany to awaken Lazarus.

The apostles did not realize that he meant to resurrect Lazarus, not literally awaken him from sleep. They were fearful of going anywhere near Jerusalem. Thomas is resigned to what is likely to happen and the group heads out toward Bethany.

Scene 2: "¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

²¹ "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴ *Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."*

²⁵ *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

²⁷ *"Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."*

Martha went out to meet Jesus as he approached the town and told him that Lazarus had been dead for four days. There were many mourners at the home and Martha was reproachful saying that if Jesus has only come earlier, Lazarus would not have died but she follows that up with the statement that God will give Jesus whatever he asks. Jesus tells her that Lazarus will rise again and she responds that she knows that. The Jews believed in resurrection at the end time, not soon after death, and that is what she thought Jesus meant. Her grief over the loss of her brother is evident.

Jesus responds saying, *"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"* and she responds that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

Lamar Williamson, Jr. said, *"Resurrection is not something that happens only after death, nor is eternal life. Both are present in Jesus Christ, and are available now to whoever believes in Jesus."* Did Martha understand that? We are not sure.

Scene 3: ²⁸ *After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you."* ²⁹ *When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.*

³² *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."*

³³ *When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked.*

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

³⁵ *Jesus wept.*

³⁶ *Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"*

³⁷ *But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"*

The mourners went with Martha and Mary expecting the women to go to the tomb. Mary fell at Jesus' feet and said that if only he had come earlier, Lazarus would have lived.

Jesus asked where Lazarus was buried and then he began to weep. Our scripture reading includes the shortest verse in the Bible, "*Jesus wept.*" Even though he knew that he could bring Lazarus back to life, his love of Lazarus, his sympathy for Mary and Martha, and his personal grief at not preventing Lazarus' death was too much even for Jesus. "*Jesus wept.*"

Scene 4: "³⁸ *Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.* ³⁹ *"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."

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

⁴¹ *So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me.* ⁴² *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."*

⁴³ *When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"*

⁴⁴ *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."

The group went to the tomb and Jesus said to remove the stone over the entrance to the tomb. Martha resists saying that Lazarus had been dead for four days and that there would be a severe stench of decay. Four days was a very long time in the hot climate of Judea. It was true, Jesus had raised others, Jairus's daughter and the son of the widow at Nain, but these happened immediately after death, not four days later. To everyone who was there, a resurrection after four days was impossible but, this was the dress rehearsal for Jesus' resurrection only a short time later.

The stone was moved away and Jesus called to Lazarus to come out. His majestic power was asserted and the dead man arose and came out. He was wrapped

in his death clothes which Jesus instructs the bystanders to remove. Lazarus says nothing. He just walks free.

Symbolically, Lazarus is wrapped in his death clothes, has been resurrected, but will eventually die again and the death clothes will once again be needed.

When Jesus is resurrected, his grave clothes are left in the tomb. He will never have need for them again.

Encore: “⁴⁵ *Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.*”

The dress rehearsal is over and the real play is about to begin.

Amen.

(1) Lamar Williamson, Jr., Preaching the Gospel of John, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2004.

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011