

## **“PEOPLE OF LIGHT”**

Ephesians 5:8; John 11:1-44

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A small group of us have been gathering on Wednesday mornings for many years now to study the Bible. As you may know, we are studying the Gospel of John this year, and we studied this particular story two and a half weeks ago. The thing I like so much about this group is the freedom they give me to “think out loud.” No one is shocked to hear me say that I don’t like something about a particular text or disturbed that class isn’t structured as a refined lecture elucidating the meaning and relevance of the text. Whatever wisdom we take away comes out in the conversation and the contributions of all of us, who are also “thinking out loud.” Each person brings something unique. A couple people are consulting commentaries. Several different translations are in the mix. And of course, we all bring our own lives, each unique in terms of experience, questions, and the things that matter. The value of this kind of study is that we get to see what scripture is saying to “us,” the community of faith, and in the process, each of us gets a sharper picture of what it might be saying to “me.”

The thing that is coming into focus for me is how important this story is to John’s Gospel. Prior to this encounter, the signs that Jesus had been performing produced believers. The water into wine, the feeding of the multitude, the healing of the blind man, and the raising of Lazarus have persuaded many to see in Jesus, one who is sent from God. But alongside this growth, an opposition developed making it increasingly dangerous to be a believer. Last week we saw the man born blind kicked out of the temple, and if you read on in chapter eleven here, the plot to kill Jesus becomes explicit and the emphasis shifts from the growing faith community to focus on the many afraid to confess Jesus.

If we compare John to the other gospels, this story stands in for Jesus’ conversation with the disciples in which he asks, “Who do people say that I am?” This leads to Peter’s confession, which is directly followed by Jesus’ announcement that he is heading to Jerusalem where he will be put to death and rise again. In all the gospels, there is a point where the mood changes. We are moving toward Jerusalem, a movement toward death.

But there is something else in John that distinguishes it from the others. The movement toward death is also a movement toward resurrection. Jesus tells Martha, “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 die.”

Cradle to grave: That’s how we see our lives. For a time, our bodies experience growth. We get stronger, our brains develop and our minds grow sharper. But at some point, the operative word is “decline.” We become slower and weaker. We start forgetting things. Some of us replace joints that are worn out, and we’re thankful for the temporary reprieve, but none of us expects to live forever, to escape death.

The raising of Lazarus reverses our understanding. The grave serves as a womb from which Lazarus is reborn and set free. Bernie asked last week, “What is eternal life?” Too often, we get stuck in our assumptions about life as a movement toward the grave, and so we confuse eternal life with “life after death.” But John messes with our sense of time. Past and future are always coming together in the present moment. Light enters the world, John tells us as he opens his gospel, and the darkness does not overcome it. Even on the cross, the darkness will not overcome it.

In this chapter, John introduces Mary as the one who anointed Jesus’ feet, but she doesn’t actually do that until the next chapter. Martha identifies Jesus as the “one coming into the world,” and yet, he is already in the world. John refuses to subject eternal life to a linear view of time. For him, the eternal is not a life that just keeps going, but a life that constantly enters into the present moment. Jesus calls it abundant life in chapter 10, but you might think of it as a life undeterred by death or the best life.

What it is not is a life unaffected by suffering and death. It does not pretend that death is not real, that suffering does not happen, or that the good is not opposed. It says that life and light exists even in the face of death, in the midst of grief, and surrounded by darkness.

In Lent, we usually focus on the journey to the cross. We emphasize the importance of repentance and engaging the spiritual disciplines. It sometimes feels like a crash course in spiritual self-improvement. To be talking about light, life, and resurrection seems out of place... but John and this story will not allow a conversation about death without also talking about resurrection. The word became flesh and lived among us. The light came into the world and the darkness did not overcome it. Lazarus died, but death would not have the last word.

The raising of Lazarus serves as the turning point in John’s Gospel, but even as Jesus moves toward the cross, the light does not dim. In the face of the horrible things to come, what keeps it shining? What is it that sustains Jesus through it all? Indeed, what has sustained him even to this point? It’s no accident that in this story, John begins to talk about Jesus’ love for his friends.

It’s not subtle, but we could possibly be forgiven for overlooking it in the context of a resurrection. As Lazarus steps out of the tomb, it would be easy to forget that the sisters’ message to Jesus describes Lazarus as “he whom you love. It would be easy to miss the statement that Jesus “loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.” Upon meeting up with Mary, what else could “being greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” mean except that her grief had profoundly touched the love that he had for her? What else could his disturbance at arriving at the tomb suggest except a deep grief born of love? The only thing some people remember from this story is the shortest verse in the Bible: “Jesus wept.” Even those present in the crowd understood Jesus’ tears as a great love for his friend Lazarus. One might argue that the gospel of love is contained in those two words.

It's hard to put into words how profoundly moving it is that Jesus' love moves to center stage in the midst of grief over the death of Lazarus. In just a few chapters, he'll urge a new commandment upon the disciples, that "they love one another even as he has loved them." And even though the story is seen as an addition to the original gospel, how appropriate it seems that after Jesus' resurrection, the question to Peter is, "Do you love me?"

Love not only keeps the light shining, but it multiplies the light. Because Jesus loves his disciples, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, they also love him. They have themselves become people of light. I would not be surprised if the main purpose of the gospel were to sustain the faith community as a people of light. Look at Thomas who urges the disciples to go so that they can die with Jesus. This is the same Thomas who will miss the first resurrection appearance to the disciples and insist on seeing the wounds before he believes, the same Thomas who proclaims Jesus as Lord and Savior upon seeing him alive. He's not perfect. He doesn't in fact die with Jesus, but he was there when Jesus was last in Jerusalem and the people wanted to stone him. He knows the danger and yet he goes. There's love there for sure.

Look at Martha, who leaves her sister's side to meet Jesus. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." I don't hear this as words of rebuke, but as an expression of a genuine relationship, an expression of the grief that she feels. She doesn't offer polite words as is so often done at funerals. No "Thank you for coming," but vulnerable words expressing disappointment perhaps, and grief certainly, and confidence that things would have been different had Jesus been there. They are honest words as only love could produce, not words of judgment, but words inviting a response. And so Jesus, loving Martha, engages her, and offers her hope, to which Martha responds with a declaration that she has not lost her faith in Jesus, that their relationship remains intact. Love holds her in that place which will enable her to see life rise up out of death.

Look at Mary, who offers up the same grief as Martha, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." There is a love between these two too deep for words. Are his tears an acknowledgement of Mary's grief? Are they an expression of his own grief both at the death of Lazarus and at the grief he might have spared his friends had he come sooner? We don't know, but we do sense a mutual love between these two. We'll see Mary's love expressed not with words, but shortly with an anointment of Jesus' feet that says, I know the danger which you are about to enter, and if my love can sustain you with courage for the journey ahead, so be it.

Look at Lazarus, who says not a word. He's the beloved in the story, beloved of Jesus, of Martha, and of Mary. Is he, too, a person of light? We don't know the rest of his story, but we do learn a little more about the nature of Jesus' love. "Unbind him and let him go." Preachers love to run with these words, talking about the nature of salvation: a loosening of the bonds that hold us in sin and keep us from the experience of grace, and an entering into the freedom of Christ. I'm sure I've preached such a sermon before, but what I'm hearing in these words is more evidence of Jesus' love. What Jesus has done for Lazarus, given him a whole new life, places no obligation upon him. Lazarus owes Jesus nothing

for this gift. Salvation is not an exchange of favors. It leaves no debt. It is a gift, an expression of love.

Love multiplies light. When people gather to study scripture, it isn't just diversity of experience and wealth of resources that enriches the conversation. It's love that allows each person to "think out loud," love that allows for vulnerability. And ultimately, it's love that leads to clarity and insight, and hope.

And it's love that multiplies the light that speaks comfort into the midst of grief, the light that moves to undo the bonds of injustice, the light that feeds the hungry, welcomes the stranger, and heals the broken. It's love that multiplies the light that shines into the darkness and into our hearts. It's love that conquers our fears, heals our brokenness, and sets us free to be people of light. Amen.