

## “Waiting”

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*First in a series on John 11*

John 10:39-11:16

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Read the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

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Friends of God get sick.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus dearly loves Lazarus. Lazarus gets sick. Very sick. Fatally sick.

Jesus dearly loves Lazarus' sisters too, Martha and Mary. When they send word to Jesus, their dear friend whom they trust and cherish, and who they knew can save their brother, Jesus does not go to help. Not right away. He waits.

Friends of God get sick, and we wait, and we wonder.

The name “Lazarus” is *El-azar* in Hebrew. *El-azar* means “God helps.” Why does Jesus, who is God-with-us, wait to help *El-azar*, his dear friend? Wait, until after Lazarus dies?

### II

For us, Easter continues. We are living in the light of Jesus' resurrection. He has already broken Death's power. He has already inaugurated God's kingdom. New Creation is spreading healing where there has been suffering, peace where there has been violence, hope where there has been terror, life where there has been death. When we trust Jesus, we realize that we are an Easter people!

This story we're starting today, however, happened before the first Easter. Lazarus was deathly ill before the first Easter. Mary and Martha sent for Jesus before the first Easter. This time when Jesus was waiting, and his disciples with him, was before his death and before his resurrection.

We live after. We have the benefit of knowing what's ahead in the story. We know how it ends, and how it begins again.

Living after Easter as we are, though, it is good nonetheless to hear this before-Easter story of Lazarus, and Mary and Martha, and Jesus. For while we are after Jesus defeated

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<sup>1</sup> John Chrysostom, quoted in Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 656.

death, we still get sick. While we are after Jesus' resurrection, we still wait for him. And we still wonder.

### III

Lazarus lived in Bethany village. He had at least these two sisters. That's all we know about him.

Of the sisters, we know a bit more. Once, Martha welcomed Jesus to stay in their home. It seems she ran the household, and was pretty consumed with all that had to be done. While she was toiling, sister Mary slipped away to join Jesus' other students learning from him. That was not considered ladylike. Martha said as much. But Jesus said "No." He welcomed Mary (and other women) as his disciples.<sup>2</sup>

Another time, Jesus was again staying at their home. Mary took it upon herself to wash Jesus feet with very expensive perfume. Again, her actions caused a stir, and again Jesus praised her. "*She's getting me ready for my burial,*" he said. It was a strange thing to say.<sup>3</sup>

You might have noticed that this perfume episode gets a mention in today's reading. That's strange too. As far as the storyline goes, it's one more thing that had not happened yet (along with Jesus' death, burial and resurrection). Yet the Gospel-writer John makes it sound like we already know what Mary would do. Maybe he figures we do. He surely wants us to draw the connection: this Mary who sent for Jesus when her brother was dying was the same Mary who, even before he was crucified, got Jesus ready for burial.

### IV

Death hangs over this whole scene . . . though it is really about life.

Remember the reaction when Jesus stopped waiting and finally decided to go to Lazarus. "*You're going back there, Jesus? Remember what happened!*" Bethany village is just over the Mount of Olives, about 2 miles outside Jerusalem. The last time he was in the city, Jesus barely escaped alive. Going back as close of Bethany was dangerous, enough that Thomas expected they would all get killed. He was almost right.

Maybe that's why Jesus waited.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This is told in Luke 10:38-42.

<sup>3</sup> See John 12:1-8. Often this episode is confused with another time a woman anointed Jesus, which is told in Luk 7:36-50. While there are some similarities, the substantial differences between these events make clear that they happened at different times, in different locations, featured different women, and had different meanings.

<sup>4</sup> N. T. Wright, John for Everyone, Part 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 3.

What did he do in those two days, between when the messenger came from the sisters and when he finally left for their place? Jesus probably kept on tending to those who were coming to him. I'm sure he prayed too. He trusted God his Father to hear him.<sup>5</sup> Maybe he was wrestling with what to do. He knew his dear friends needed him. He knew they counted on him. In this waiting time, somehow Jesus realized Lazarus was dead. Did Jesus already know he would raise Lazarus back to life? He must have known, then, that more than anything he had already done, this would set things to boiling. The powers claim authority to take life. But what will they do with someone who can give life to the dead?

Maybe Jesus waited to make sure of what he needed to do.

Maybe Jesus waited because other things needed to happen first.

He loved Lazarus, Martha and Mary. And he waited. Somehow the waiting and the loving went together.

## V

We are just starting into this story. The next few weeks are for unpacking it. So of course there are many loose ends. We will have to see how Jesus ties them together.

Let me finish today just by noticing some things.

I began with the first. Being friends with Jesus does not shield us from getting sick, even dying. The fact that such things befall people of God is in no way a sign of how much (or how little) God loves us. We tell God what is going on (of course, God already knows). We plead with God to do something. We wait and wait, even to death. God's love remains steadfast and sure, more than we can imagine or hope. Jesus loves Lazarus, Mary and Martha. Lazarus is sick and dies. Martha and Mary are shattered, and terribly disappointed in Jesus. And Jesus keeps loving them.

I notice this tragedy of Lazarus' illness and death, and his sister's disappointment and heartbreak, does not get to be the end of things. We won't skip by the hard stuff. Jesus does not. Yet these things happen on the way to something. Through what will happen, God and the Son of God will together be "glorified." Will it be through what happens to Lazarus? Will it be through what Jesus does? Will it be through the aftereffects of what Jesus does? It's nowhere near clear yet, not in this story and not in our stories. All we know is that through what is happening, we will see something of Jesus, something of the fullness of God, and it will be glorious.

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<sup>5</sup> See verse 41.

I notice what Jesus says, when folks wonder why he is going back into the danger. He tells a little parable about daytime. When you walk in the light of day you don't trip and fall, because you can see. At night, though, there are all sorts of dangers to stumble over in the dark. Jesus is the Light of our world, and the only way to keep from falling over is to keep following the Light. Even when we don't know or understand where the Light is going, or what the Light is doing, or why the Light is waiting. We do know that if we go off and try to pick our way through the dark alone, we'll be lost and flounder for certain.

Those finishing words Thomas said show us something. *"Let us also go, that we may die with him."* He realized that even into the danger, we do best sticking close to the Light who is Jesus. And unlike Thomas, we need have no doubt about what Jesus will do when death comes our way.

This is the Good News of Jesus, especially after Easter and his resurrection. Thanks be to God!