

March 29, Lent 5A (John 11:1–45)

Lazarus's story is one of grief—and hope.

by [Katie Hines-Shah](#) in the [March 25, 2020](#) issue

The raising of Lazarus is a big story with oversized themes. There's love and pain, doubt and faith, death and resurrection. The story prepares us for Holy Week by preparing us to deal with grief.

Grief is complicated. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's famous stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—were intended to describe the emotions of the dying. While these stages might be applied to anyone experiencing loss, each person grieves in their own way, repeating or skipping steps along the way. There is no typical way to grieve, just as there is no typical loss.

Certainly the loss of Lazarus is not typical—not for his sisters, and not for his friend Jesus. John uses the word love three times to describe the depth of Jesus' relationship with Lazarus. John does not describe what is at stake for the sisters, and perhaps he does not need to do so. Siblings are our oldest friends and our first enemies, holders of our history and bearers of our future. In Mary and Martha's context, Lazarus might be even more important. No husband, father, or son appears in the sisters' story. Scholars posit that Lazarus filled the role of patriarch, holding the family property and providing for his sisters' maintenance. There's no telling what might happen should Mary and Martha lose their protector.

The stakes are high when Mary and Martha send a message to Jesus that Lazarus is ill. When Jesus delays, John rationalizes the choice: Jesus knows where this story will end, sees in it a means to God's glory and an opportunity to deepen the disciples' faith. But we who know grief can't help but wonder. Is this Jesus' own moment of denial? Who among us wants to admit that those we love are mortal? Is John perhaps using Jesus' voice to rationalize pain too great to understand?

In any case, Jesus arrives too late. Lazarus isn't just sleeping, as the disciples suppose. Jesus' labored retort to them seems almost angry. They've been with "the light of the world" all this time, yet they still do not see. But the disciples'

misunderstanding isn't the worst of what Jesus will face in this chapter. When Lazarus's sisters hear that Jesus has finally arrived, their grief comes at him from all directions.

If Jesus had come in time, Martha bargains when she goes to meet him, perhaps her brother would not have died. She adds that she knows God will still give Jesus whatever he asks, but her proclamation rings hollow. Martha responds to Jesus' promise of resurrection life with a vague and depressing affirmation: these things will be "on the last day." She can't hold up much hope for now.

By contrast, Mary perhaps is too angry at first to meet Jesus face to face. She stays behind, at home, waiting for him to come to her. Only at the private urging of her sister, only after Jesus asks for her specifically, does Mary come to meet him. When she does, Mary offers the same bargaining accusation her sister used: Jesus could have prevented this tragedy, but it's too late now. Her depression spills over into tears.

Jesus himself has no clever retort. He asks to see the grave, and then he weeps, too.

This shortest of Bible verses generates much ink. John has made it plain that Jesus knows Lazarus will be raised, so why would he weep? Some scholars suggest that he regrets bringing Lazarus back to a fallen world. Eastern Orthodox tradition holds that Lazarus never smiled after his resurrection: having witnessed souls languishing in hell, he can never feel joy again. Others surmise that Jesus weeps because Lazarus will need to die again as a martyr.

Our modern understanding of grief opens other possibilities. Jesus' grief is not a denial of God's power but the ultimate admission of God's love—for Lazarus, for Mary and Martha, and for his own life, so soon to be taken. John writes that God's love for the world is realized through Jesus embracing rather than rejecting humanity. We only come to know God through this divine act of grace. Maybe that's why "Jesus wept" is better remembered than John's heady descriptions of his motives. It means something to us that Jesus is deeply moved, that he feels the way we do. It means something that Jesus grieves as we do, that he too will walk grief's stages. New possibilities are opened if we suppose Jesus grieves as he goes to the cross. We can imagine a God who grieves when we suffer and who will not rest until all are redeemed.

This study of grief is not without recourse. We do not grieve as those who do not have hope. Christians always read the story of the passion with the knowledge of the resurrection. We read the stories of our world, of those we love, and of ourselves knowing that something more awaits. The raising of Lazarus is not just a foretaste of the feast to come but a real and tangible sign: resurrection is not just for “the last day” but also for now.

We can expect that God will call us out of tombs. We can anticipate being called to unbind those long thought dead. Having seen the resurrection of Lazarus, alongside other resurrections in our lives and in our world, we can, like Mary, dare to believe.

This is a story of grief and also hope. We need not fear our own emotional journeys during Lent and during our lives. A fully human Jesus affirms our humanity—meeting us on the road, calling to us at home, insisting that the stones that bar our tombs be taken away. He weeps with us, and he calls us to life anew. Resurrection is only the beginning.