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Glen Ridge Congregational Church



Detail from "The Deposition of Christ" by Rogier Van Der Weyden

Sunday, March 22, 2026  
John 11:1 – 45

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

The story we hear this morning is a story that makes audacious claims. And as I say this you might think that what I am referring to is the resurrection of Lazarus, that what I think is audacious about this story must be the raising of a dead man, and returning him to life. I will admit resurrection is, for me, and maybe for you too, a claim that tests my faith.

But actually, it is not the claim of resurrection that I find most moving in our story. For me, it is that Jesus cries at the death of his friend Lazarus.

So many of our stories of Jesus can seem overly stage-managed. They can appear as scenes which carry with them the faintest or not-too-faint suggestion that Jesus is simply going through the motions of the life you and I lead, lives touched by great joy, but also deep sadness.

We see it in this story. Jesus hears of his friend's illness, and he doesn't rush to be with him so that he can heal him. He doesn't seem to be moved immediately by his heart, and his bond with his sick friend. Instead, he delays his journey so that God's glory may be revealed. It can seem like Jesus is willing to use a friend's death to make a point about God's power. This might not be the most reassuring statement of God's relationship to all of us who suffer and experience loss in this world.

Jesus, who our tradition tells us is both fully human AND fully God, can often seem to be more heavily weighted to the Divine side of things, the transcendent side, which can be experienced as aloof and removed from the human experience. Jesus, using Aristotle's phrase, can often seem to be the unmoved mover in human form, who also seems strangely disconnected from us.

To say that Jesus is both God and human is the first audacious claim that the Gospel of John makes. The gospel opens with the famous hymn that tells us that:

“In the beginning was the Word.  
And the Word was with God, and was God.”

And a little later on we are told that this Word came to live among us, and that Jesus is this Word. For the author of John's gospel, God becomes human. Lives among us. Travels the path of human experience with us. The image of Jesus we have in this gospel is not

one of simply a wise man, or a man imbued with God's Spirit. The image we receive is one in which Jesus and God are one. To interact with Jesus is to learn something about God, and for God to manifest as Jesus is God trying to teach us something of God's self.

And what God shows us about God's self can upend everything we think we know about God.

The first part of the story we hear this morning does seem stage-managed and artificial. But things begin to change as Jesus gets closer and closer to Bethany. Slowly, but surely, Jesus begins to seem more human, more connected to our experience, and much more emotional. Slowly, but surely, as God comes into closer contact with the beings made in God's image, God seems not as transcendent, not as removed. God seems to care.

Jesus meets Mary and she tells him that her brother has died. She weeps. And she tells him what he already knows: that if he had been there Lazarus would never have died. And he doesn't fall back on his statement that he did everything he did for the glory of God, because he knows he can't say that to a woman he says he loves, who is broken by grief. His heart just isn't that hard. God's heart just isn't that heavenly. Instead, we are told that he was "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved."

All of this, for me, is the most audacious claim of this morning's reading. To claim that God, the Creator of all things, not only relates to us, but loves us, is audacious. To say that an ordinary woman's grief and broken heart can move God is audacious. These are claims that overturn Aristotle, and so much of the way people talk and think about God.

And then it happens. They take him to where Lazarus has been buried for four days, to the tomb that is leaking the stench of death, and Jesus weeps. He cries not just for the woman who has lost her brother, he also cries for himself at the loss of his friend.

I was once in a Bible study group, and we were thinking about how Jesus expresses his human side. We were asking ourselves when does Jesus seem the most human. It is in Jesus's heartbroken tears that he seems most human to me, because they are shed without being stage-managed, without an ulterior motive. They are cried because of Jesus feeling our human love and loss, and being willing to be so mortally vulnerable as he stands before his friend's tomb.

It is with tears in his eyes, being moved by the grief of the woman he loves, that Jesus calls out to Lazarus to rise and be welcomed back into the world of the living. And his friend hears and responds, and on wobbly legs leaves his tomb and is unbound from his shroud.

When Jesus first hears that Lazarus is dead he says he will wait, that he will allow his friend to die, so that God's glory can be revealed. And we might think God's glory will be revealed in power and in resurrection. But I wonder if God's glory is revealed in the audacity of God's love for us. I wonder if God's true power is revealed by the fact that God is willing to be moved by the broken heart of an ordinary woman. I wonder if God's holiness is truly proclaimed by the tears that God suffers in the moments when God loses each and every one of us, and the way God is willing to break God's own laws of nature to be reunited with us, because God loves us too much to let us go.

Amen.