

John 11:1-44

Rage, Rage Against the Dying of the Light

Our culture is obsessed with death. Or rather, with immortality. Celebrities undergo millions of dollars of plastic surgery to look years younger than their age. Cosmetic slogans read, “Why be anything if you can’t be beautiful,” or “beauty is eternal.” Fairytales are full of evil stepmothers doing anything possible to maintain or regain their youthful beauty. Legends tell of wars fought over the fountain of youth, which promises to restore youth to anyone who drinks or bathes in its waters.

Superheroes never die... have you noticed? Wolverine regenerates and self-heals before he can ever die; timelines are reversed, therefore death is reversed; pits of magical water called ‘Lazarus pits’ are used to bring those who have died back to life; a whole group of superheroes are called “the Eternals” because, well, they kind of live forever.

We are obsessed with immortality. Everyone wants to stay young and live forever. We hate death.

In the community I grew up in, the family of the deceased would take on the responsibility of cleaning up and presenting the body of their loved one for the funeral. The community pitched in to make food for the reception, and the grave was manually dug by church members and later filled in by family members as they wept.

Here in the city, when a loved one dies, we usually take them to a funeral home to clean up the body and make it presentable by embalming. We prefer memorials over funerals, closed caskets over open ones, and cremations over wakes. We do anything possible to make death sterile, distancing ourselves from its reality.

Death is painful. And yet, death is a reality of our existence. It’s a bit of a dilemma.

Many of us have lost loved ones or know someone who lost a loved one during the pandemic. War rages in Ukraine, India, and the Middle East. Wildfires destroy forests, animal habitats, and homes. Cancer and disease are part of many of our stories.

We really, really don’t like death. We use phrases like “they’ve passed away,” or “they’ve gone to a better place,” “they’ve met their maker,” or “they were called home.” We try to soften the blow, somehow, as if we could make the departure of our loved one easier.

In today’s world of modern medicine and preventative technology, we escape death more often than not. Well, we prolong it. Mammograms detect breast cancer; PAP smears detect cervical cancer; EKGs detect heart anomalies; ultrasounds detect blood clots; MRIs detect tumours or cysts... and then once diagnosed, surgeries eliminate bowel obstructions and tumours and fix broken bones or clean wounds that have gotten infected, pacemakers keep hearts beating, chemotherapy and radiation blasts away at cancer, hoping to eradicate it forever, and medication keeps our organs functioning at optimal levels. Vaccines have virtually eliminated diseases such as measles, polio, and tuberculosis.

In today’s world, it’s difficult to believe that we can’t beat death. Even a hundred years ago, death was a far more present reality. Sickness was often unexplained and infection was deadly. The Canadian child mortality rate for those under five years old was 33% in 1830, 24% in 1920, and has been *less than 1%* since the 1990s.

Our world today, at least here in Canada, is arguably a better place. We live longer and usually healthier lives than our ancestors. But we can't escape death entirely. It is the one guarantee that will happen to us all.

Death is the worst injustice. It separates us from our loved ones and from everything that we've ever known. That's the worst part about death, really – it's the unknown that frightens us. Sure, there have been cases of near-death experiences and visions of the afterlife. But no one who has been proclaimed dead for hours or days lives again. No one. We know that. When someone is dead, there is no going back.

How are you feeling? Are you noticing anxiety rising up in you as I'm talking? Are you remembering an encounter with death for either you or your loved one?

This is an uncomfortable topic that we would rather not talk about. I get that. It's not easy to deal with pain, grief, or loss. It's not easy to face the fear of the unknown.

Pay attention to that anxiety. Hold onto it. Resist the urge to crack a joke to your neighbour just to lessen the tension. I invite you to sit with your discomfort.

Because the Bible has something to say about death.

See, in the Bible, there's this story:

Once upon a time, in a land and time far, far away from here, there was a man and his two sisters. They loved one another very much. One day, the man got sick. Very sick. The two sisters, knowing just how dangerous sickness could be, sent for their friend who had a reputation for healing illnesses. Surely he could heal their brother and stave off death as he'd done for so many others! Surely he would come immediately to help them.

Remember too, that since this was a place and time far away from here, there weren't any MRIs or antibiotics to be had. When someone got sick, family members would care for them, providing food and water and cleaning them up as necessary, until the person pulled through and recovered or they died.

So when Jesus heard that his dear friend Lazarus was sick, you would think that he would rush to his side to heal him. After all, he'd proven again and again that he had that power.

But he didn't. Why not?

When something is in your power to do, don't you want to do it? Don't you want to spare the people you love pain if you are able to do anything about it?

It's not that he didn't love them – he did! The gospel of John takes extra care to highlight just how much Jesus loved Lazarus, Mary, and Martha in verse three and five and again in verse 36.

Jesus' immediate response is: *"This sickness will not end in death but is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God might be glorified through it."* (11:4) And then he stayed for two more days in the place where he was.

When Jesus finally decides to leave, he uses a most peculiar phrase: *"Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I'm on my way to wake him up."* (11:11) The disciples don't understand the metaphor, so Jesus makes it absolutely clear in verse 14: *"Lazarus has died."* (11:14) But he'd just said that the sickness wouldn't end in death!

Is Jesus being callous toward his friend's death? Does he care at all?

Jesus' reason for not leaving immediately is *"I'm glad for you that I wasn't there so that you may believe."* (11:15)

If I were a disciple with Jesus, I would be thoroughly confused.

If Jesus loved Lazarus, why didn't he act immediately? Why did he wait until it was too late?

If Jesus loved *me*, why doesn't he fix the reasons for my pain? Why doesn't he prevent death?

When the entire world has almost literally gone to hell, when relationships have ruptured, when jobs are lost and houses are burned down – why doesn't God do something? Does he care at all?

These are the big questions that so many of us ask when we pray and pray, but we receive no answer. The skies are iron; God isn't listening; nothing happens to answer our desperate cry for help. We might 'know' that God loves us, but it sure doesn't feel like he cares.

I hope you have as many questions about this as I do.

Hang onto those feelings of anxiety and frustration, and let's keep going.

So Jesus arrives in Bethany and finds that Lazarus has indeed died. He's been in the grave for four days. The ancient Jews believed that the soul might re-enter the body of the deceased up to three days after the death. But *four* days after death? There is no hope of a return to life, no possible reversal of the timeline. His sisters, Mary and Martha, have been comforted by their friends, family, and neighbours as they grieved and mourned the loss of their brother, who had also been their protector and possibly the primary breadwinner for their family.

"As soon as Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him." (11:20)

We know from the gospel of Luke that Martha is the practical sister. She's the go-getter, the one who gets things done in the house. When action needs to happen, she's the one at the forefront. So it's no wonder that she leaves to meet Jesus even before he gets there.

Her first words are the question that I think is on all of our minds: *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died."* (11:21) **What in the world, Jesus? Why didn't you come??**

It doesn't make sense. Death doesn't make sense. The loss of a loved one, a child, a relationship, a home, or your health *doesn't make sense*. We know that. Innately, we know that death is not right. But it *is* unavoidable. Death happens. Each time we lose someone dear to us, we are reminded that death is a final separation from the life we know now.

That's not all that Martha says, though. Even in her confusion, she demonstrates amazing faith in Jesus. She says, *"Yet even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you."* (11:21)

"Your brother will rise again," Jesus told her. Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again at the resurrection at the last day." (11:23-24)

She believed that her brother would rise again in terms of a general resurrection at the Last Day, the day of God's judgment. This was a common belief among the Jews, unless you were a Sadducee who didn't believe in the resurrection. The resurrection meant that those who were God's faithful people would be raised from the dead at the end of time.

But then Jesus looks at her and speaks these amazing words of power: ***"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me, even if he dies, will live. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*** (11:25-26)

Seven times in the gospel of John, Jesus makes “I am” statements: “I am the bread of life” that feeds you in the wilderness of the soul (6:35, 48), “I am the light of the world” that extinguishes all darkness (8:12, 9:5); “I am the gate for the sheep” who follow me as their shepherd (10:7, 9); “I am the good shepherd” who leads his sheep by the still waters (10:11, 14, Ps. 23:1-6)... That’s only four, and this one, “I am the resurrection and the life,” is number five.

Do you believe this?

Do you believe that Jesus is who he says, that he is the Son of God, that he is *God himself* come down to earth? Do you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the king who brings God’s kingdom to earth? **Do you believe that he has power over life and death because he is the one who *created life in the first place*?**

Martha answers without hesitation: “*Yes, Lord,*” she told him. “*I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who comes into the world.*” (11:27)

Even without a single miracle, Martha emphatically believes in Jesus’ ability to make everything right – if not now, then at the end of time on the day of God’s judgment. She believes that *Jesus* is the Lord over life and death. And that’s enough for her, even in her sorrow, even while she has questions.

Martha doesn’t understand yet how Jesus can conquer death, but she knows that he is the Messiah. She asks the big questions, trying to make sense of her brother’s death, while absolutely believing in Jesus. He is the one who the prophet Isaiah said would

“bring good news to the poor... to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and freedom to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour... to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who mourn in Zion; to give them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, festive oil instead of mourning, and splendid clothes instead of despair.” (Is. 61:1-2)

She doesn’t understand everything. She’s asking questions. She is mourning and grieving the loss of her brother. Yet she believes.

There is something about Jesus that is worth believing in, even when life says otherwise.

Then, she tells her sister Mary to go out and meet Jesus. Now, by all accounts, Mary is the soft-spoken one, the sensitive one who willingly sat at Jesus’ feet to hear his words rather than to work hard making a meal for him. Mary’s question is exactly the same as her sister’s: “*Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died!*” (11:32) **Why didn’t you come, Jesus?**

And here, we see the most incredible thing. Jesus doesn’t ask her about whether she believes in him, as he did with Martha. “*When Jesus saw her crying, and the Jews who had come with her crying, he was deeply moved in his spirit and troubled.*” (11:33) Then he walks over to Lazarus’ grave and *he weeps*. (11:35)

Why? Jesus *knew* that he could raise Lazarus. He had proclaimed himself the resurrection and the life. **Why does Jesus weep?**

The first of these descriptions, that he was ‘deeply moved in spirit,’ is often translated elsewhere in Scripture as ‘anger’. Not only anger, but *outrage*. Jesus is *outraged*, not at Mary and those who are grieving, but at the presence of death in the world. Jesus weeps for the brokenness of this world. The Son of God, who was present at the creation of the world when all was perfect and bright, looks at the darkness that covers his beloved friends and the death that was brought on by sickness, and he weeps.

The second word, 'troubled,' expresses agitation. Jesus is not apathetic to the sorrow of Mary and Martha. He sees the grief of those who have lost everything that mattered to them, and he is *angry* and *agitated*.

He is upset because **this is not the way the world was meant to be** when God said, "Let there be light." Death is the separation of Adam and Eve from God, the separation of human from human, and the separation of human from creation. Death has formed a broken, distorted world.

So, weeping is a right response to death. By death, I mean physical death, yes, but also spiritual death, relational death, the death of hopes and dreams, and the death of what is good in the world. Empathy, grief, and compassion overflow from Jesus as he weeps at Lazarus' graveside. Even he, the one who has the power to right all wrongs, weeps when we weep and mourns when we mourn.

He *sees* the brokenness in your life, in the world. He does not ignore it. He does not airbrush it, sugarcoat it, or try to sanitize it. He rages, rages against the dying of the light.

It's worth noting that Jesus had two very different responses to the same question. Both sisters say the same thing to him, "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died.*" (11:21, 32) Sometimes, like Martha and Mary, we can't fathom why God isn't hurrying to our rescue. *Jesus, why don't you come?* Tragedy, death, and suffering happen and it seems like God does nothing. At least, it looks that way from our perspective.

To ever-practical Martha, Jesus appeals to her knowledge of Scripture and her intellect. She *knows* about the hope of the Messiah and believes that Jesus is it. Jesus responds by expanding her belief: "I am [also] the resurrection and the life. *I am more than what you thought I was. I am the one who was present at creation and the one who is Lord over even death.*" Martha's hope is in her belief in Jesus, even while she doesn't understand. She knows that because of who Jesus is, **death is not the end of the story.**

To Mary, who falls weeping uncontrollably at Jesus' feet, Jesus doesn't respond with theology, facts, or logic. He simply weeps. He joins in her suffering at the centre of her raw and painful emotions. He is outraged with her. Jesus reveals to Mary and the Jews with her that **he is the God who weeps and rages with us as we weep and rage against the injustice of death.** The God who weeps with us is a God worth believing in.

Notice how neither response is wrong. Jesus doesn't condemn either of them for asking questions. **He meets them where they are in their expressions of grief.**

There are those among us who respond to tragedy by sticking to our knowledge and our faith. We might ask big, confused questions, but we are willing to say as Martha does, "*Yes, Lord, I believe.*" (11:27) Somehow, we will believe, even when we don't understand. This is where we stand when we profess to believe that Jesus, Messiah, Son of God, will come again to make everything whole again. We know that *suffering and death are not the end of the story*, even when everything around us tells us otherwise. We have hope in the happy ending that the biblical story points forward to because of Jesus.

There are also those among us who can't even begin to articulate rational thought and all we have left is our heart's deepest cries. *Why, God? If you loved us, why did this happen?* We are angry at the injustice in the world, outraged at the presence of death and destruction. All we can do is weep.

Jesus' response to death includes both outrage and hope. We are both Martha and Mary. We profess belief beyond a doubt *and* we weep in outrage. We are comforted by the knowledge that Jesus is

the resurrection and the life *and* we are comforted by the knowledge that he weeps with us. Both sides of the spectrum are needed to reflect Christ's character in the face of death and suffering. One response is not better than the other; *both* are good and necessary.

This brings us back to our earlier question: Why didn't Jesus come and heal Lazarus before he died, avoiding this whole situation? For that matter, why doesn't he come again and make the earth whole right now, banishing death forever? He has the power to do it, so why doesn't he?

Consider this: by allowing Lazarus' death to happen, Martha and Mary encountered Jesus in a way that would not have otherwise happened. **Sometimes suffering happens so that we encounter Jesus in ways that we could not have otherwise.**

However we respond to tragedy and death, whether we are trying to make sense of it like Martha or completely overwhelmed by grief like Mary, **Jesus meets us there.** And this means that we can also meet others in their varying responses to grief – in questioning, sorrow, or outrage. We have hope for a better world *and* we rage against the injustice of death in our present world. Death does not have the final say. Because of Jesus, it is not the end of our story.

He is the Resurrection and the Life.

Do you believe this?

Let's pray:

Lord God, may we recognize ourselves in the story of Martha and Mary. When we grieve the death and tragedy in our world, we ask that your presence be made known to us. Jesus, you are the Resurrection and the Life, who faced death very personally and decisively conquered it. May we say as Martha said, "Yes, Lord, I believe." May we weep in sorrow and outrage as Mary did. Thank you that your Holy Spirit weeps with us when we weep and mourns with us when we mourn. May our hope rest in you that one day death will be completely and totally done away with. Amen.

Benediction: read 1 Cor. 15:54-58