

Going There Again

John 11:1-45

Home Moravian Church, March 22, 2026

1-3: Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.”

The message doesn't say what Mary and Martha expected. But we can guess. By now, everyone knew that Jesus had told a man with a dying child, “Your son will live”—and the son did. He had told a man who had been ill for 38 years to take up his mat and walk—and the man did. He had mixed his saliva with mud, daubed it on the eyes of a blind man, and told the man to go and wash it off—and when the man did, he could see. By now, everyone knew that Jesus had healed the sick and even the dying. Surely Mary and Martha hoped he would heal their brother.

Also, the message says that Jesus loves Lazarus; so Jesus is not only a healer, but a friend. As my elementary Sunday school class recently told me during a Bible lesson: When you're sad, a friend can help you feel better. So even if Mary and Martha were not expecting a healing, they were probably hoping for the presence of their friend.

4-6: But when Jesus heard [the message], he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather, it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through

it.” Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

I always feel hurt by that, on Mary and Martha’s behalf. Jesus was a friend, and Jesus made a deliberate choice to linger where he was. Imagine that you made yourself vulnerable like Mary and Martha, and revealed your need to a friend; and your friend did not come.

In the days, or weeks, or years that followed, would you ever talk to your friend about that? Or would you be so hurt that you’d never go there—afraid of what might happen if you opened your heart, and looked squarely at the pain inside it? There are all kinds of reasons not to return to something that has hurt you.

In fact, in this story, I see some warnings against going to a place of pain again. For example:

7-8: After staying two extra days in the place where he was, [Jesus] said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?”

Really, Lord? You’re going there?

The disciples aren’t exaggerating the danger. Just a few verses back, in chapter 10, the locals had indeed taken up stones and were looking forward to using them. Jesus had fled across the Jordan River in what must have been a harrowing escape; and now, here he is, all, “Let’s go back to Judea!” And his disciples are thinking, “Lord, don’t go there. Why would you return to

the place where people were so ready to hurt you? Are you that brave? Are you that foolish? Do you think that by returning to that place of pain, you can bring something different out of it?"

The disciples don't yet know about Lazarus. What Jesus said about the illness not leading to death but its being for God's glory, he apparently said to himself. He could have told his disciples, and then spent the next two days preparing them for the trip back to Judea. Not only could he have beefed up their courage; he could have prepared them, like a teacher preparing his class for a field trip, saying, "Here's what to look for when we go to the museum!" Only Jesus would have been saying, "Here's what to look for when the Son of Man is glorified! Here's what to look for, when you're looking for the glory of God."

After two days, through, Jesus speaks with urgency as he gives his disciples the news:

9-16: Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble because the light is not in them. Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him."

The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Dangerous as it may be, they will return; and if Jesus dies, well, at least one of the disciples seems ready to die, too. Perhaps the courage of Thomas inspires courage in them all.

17-21: When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Remember that question I asked before? If a friend had really hurt you, let you down, would you ever talk to your friend about it? Would you go there?

Martha does, but it feels almost like an accident, like something that just slipped out. And hear how quickly she talks her way back out of it, shifting her focus from what Jesus didn't do, to what he might yet do:

22: “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”

I notice that Martha, faithful though she is, won't say what she really wants. It's too ridiculous—and if she doesn't say it, she will be able to excuse Jesus for not doing it.

But what she won't say, Jesus hears, and addresses:

23: Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

Many Jews of Jesus' day did believe in a resurrection of the dead, drawing on a passage from the book of Daniel: “Many who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake.” Martha hears

in Jesus' words the language of her faith and a promise for an age to come; and, just as you and I would do in a time of loss, she draws from that promise what comfort she can.

24: Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

Martha seems willing to pretend this answer is enough; but Jesus offers more.

25-26: Jesus said to her, "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. Do you believe this?"

"I am the resurrection and the life." With this proclamation, Jesus tells Martha that resurrection is not limited to the future, but fully present and available, in the person of Jesus. There is life in the future, and life in the here and now; before and after death, humanity is fully, abundantly alive in Jesus.

Jesus wants to know that Martha believes this, and Martha says that she does.

27: She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

This is a celebrated confession of faith. But at this moment, I'm not hearing celebration. I hear that Martha has worked hard to find her own comfort, moving from "Lord, if you had been here" to "Lord, I believe." But isn't there still the question of Jesus' absence in her time of need? Martha went there, but pulled quickly out of it. Still, there's another sister.

28-32: When [Martha] had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when [Mary] heard it, she got up quickly and went to [Jesus.]

Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house consoling her saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

And there it is again. However Martha has found comfort through faith, Mary hasn't had her turn with Jesus. And when she has it, she is in the same place where Martha was. "Lord, if you had been here." Just like Martha, Mary goes there. Because, as scary as it is, going there is what we do. It's how we grieve. We revisit the place of pain. We search for explanations. We long to understand.

And Jesus, I think, longs to explain. He seems to have been headed there with Martha as he urged her into belief. Maybe he could have gone even further with Mary; but suddenly, it seems to be all too much for someone fully human—even if he is also fully divine.

33-35: When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep.

With everyone now in tears, Jesus, at last, weeps too. Is he heartbroken by the grief of Mary and Martha? Is he frustrated, because he has something so important to say, and the people cannot understand? How are we to take his tears? The crowd is divided.

36-37: So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

It's a fair question. The crowd has its own hurt; and the crowd is going there, too.

38-39: Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."

This is Martha talking. Martha, who made that great confession of faith. Now, at the mouth of the tomb, we see she is still full of doubt. Like the disciples, back in the beginning of the story, she cautions Jesus against going into a place of danger. She has found at least some comfort in her conversation with Jesus, perhaps a moment of stability in her profoundly shaken world; and now, she doesn't want to go back to a place of pain. Lord Jesus: don't open that tomb. It's only going to stink.

I remember teaching this story to an elementary school class at another church. We were using the King James Bible, which used the word “stinketh.” As in, “Lord,” said Martha, “by this time he stinketh.” My class was agog. “It says that in the BIBLE?”

Yes, it does. And what stinketh, we avoideth. We are afraid of going there again.

Have we been wounded in war, broken by illness, devastated by loss? Don’t go there again; there is grief. Have we been disappointed, even deeply hurt by friends or family? Don’t go there again; there is anger. Have we been confronted with painful realities that call into question our understanding of history? Don’t go there. There’s a stench.

We can choose not to go back to a place of pain. Or we can choose to go into that place looking for the glory of God.

40-44: Jesus said to [Martha], “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?”

So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

What does the glory of God look like? Something entirely unexpected and completely new. Something we thought impossible. Something like Lazarus coming out of the tomb.

The glory of God looks like life. Life, where we expected only death. When we go looking for the glory of God, the thing to look for is life. Life itself; life abundant; life, in the person of Jesus Christ. Glory, hallelujah!

I imagine that for Martha, seeing Lazarus coming out of the tomb was even scarier than the thought of opening it. But her grief, her faith, her life, all were changed by seeing something entirely new.

When something terrible happens, for the longest time all we can do is imagine what might have gone differently. This is the work of grief: returning to the place of pain, and reliving the event, over and over, acknowledging all the possibilities, all of them past. If only we had done this, if only someone else had done that.... We ruminate on all the things that happened, and all the things that did not.

There comes a time when we grow tired of revisiting the place of pain. We begin to make accommodations, practice workarounds, find comfort and stability where we can. Once we have taught ourselves to stay away, we certainly don't want to go back there. Surely we will not see anything new. But if we believe that Jesus was God being God in an entirely new way, who can say what we will see?

45: Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Martha was one of those who believed in him. We've heard an awful lot today about Martha. But what about her sister?

In this story, Mary spoke a single line: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” That is where the story left her, kneeling in front of Jesus, weeping, in that place of pain. But Jesus goes there with her. He weeps with her. And then he shows Mary, and Martha, and everyone in that crowd what has been true all along: The life that is in him is always present with us. Jesus is always present with us, everywhere and always, showing us the glory of God. And next time we see Mary, she’ll be kneeling in front of Jesus again: and she’ll be anointing his feet with perfume, and wiping them with her hair.

That’s the kind of thing you might do, if you had seen the glory of God. The kind of thing you might do, for a friend, who, you can now see, has never failed to love you. The kind of thing you might do to celebrate abundant life, which, you now understand, has been with you all along, and is with you always. Glory, hallelujah! Amen.