

## **The True Story**

### **John 11:17-45**

Good Morning Church Family,

It's so good to be together with you all this morning and I especially want to say hello to those who are joining us on the livestream.

Last weekend was Mennonite Church Saskatchewan's Annual Delegates Session. The guest speaker for the event was David Boshart, he's the current President of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. I really appreciated him as a speaker (I think he might be the first ADS speaker I've ever seen who actually abided by their allotted time for speaking!) Something that he said in one of his sessions has been knocking around in my head this week as I prepared for my sermon. He was talking about the importance of the church "doing theology". He said that when he uses that phrase "doing theology", he sees people's eyes glaze over as they imagine a heady lecture on the nature of the divine. But here's how he defined "doing theology": "Doing theology means reading with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in other, and not forgetting which story is true." "Doing theology means reading with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in other, and not forgetting which story is true."

I think Boshart's intimation that there are two stories, two narratives being told in the world is quite true. We see the world, society as it presents itself; in the news, in social

media, in government and the things that our culture chooses to value. And the same time, as followers of Jesus know that there is another story happening; the story that is presented in Scripture; of a God who created a world who loves the world, who came in the form of a human to reconcile us back to God, a story of a culture where love, peace and justice as defined by Jesus are possible. These two stories push and pull at us, asking us to place our trust in one over the other. To believe that this is all there is or that another world is possible. To not forget which story is true

I think this is a very salient challenge for us here in the year of our Lord 2023. We are living in a time after Christendom, that is the belief in Jesus, God and the importance of the church to the social fabric of our society is no longer the case. Which, to be clear, is NOT a bad thing in and of itself. I was talking with Jeanette Hanson a couple of weeks ago for an article for Canadian Mennonite and she told me a story about the Chinese Pastors, who “brought her up”, telling her, “Let us show you how to be the church in minority”. I do NOT think that the call of the church in 2023 is to restore Christianity to cultural significance. Further, as part of our post-Christendom culture, everything about our understanding of the world has been flattened. What we see, the material world, is all that there is. There is nothing above or below, this is what there is. And sometimes, this story can feel SO LOUD. How could another story ever be possible?

For those of us who hold on to that other story, a story of a loving God at work in the world, I think this is one of the reasons why the season of Lent and Easter is so, so very important for us to journey through. Lent, Holy Week and Easter invite us to tell the

story once again to one another, to act the story out at the communion table, to journey alongside Jesus in the last forty days, to hear the real story of his life, his death and his resurrection. And in this life, nowhere is the idea of competing stories more present than in death. Nowhere is more present than in hospital rooms, in hospice corridors, and in funeral homes. Death is so completely inevitable for all of us and so utterly, achingly wrong and unnatural. That is precisely the tension that our Lord Jesus finds himself immersed in John chapter 11.

In our scripture for this morning, Jesus has arrived at the village of his beloved friends, Lazarus, Mary and Martha. The trio are siblings. We know from scripture that Jesus has spent a good deal of time with the three of them, John chapter 11 calls Lazarus the “one whom Jesus loved” and notes that this Mary is the one who anointed Jesus’ feet with ointment and wiped them dry with her hair. These are close friends. I can’t help but wonder if John went to such great lengths to communicate the intimacy of this friendship so that we could imagine ourselves in the position of Jesus, and vice versa, knowing the terrible anguish that comes with a beloved friend's death.

When Jesus gets to the edge of the village, Martha runs out to Jesus and tells him plainly that Lazarus is dead. We can place ourselves too in that terrible moment, when we have to inform someone of a death, when we have to pick up the phone and make that call. The announcement that nobody wants to make. I’ve been both the giver of that sort of news and the receiver of that news- both are terrible And then Martha, in her pain and her understanding of who Jesus is and what he could do says to him, “Lord, if

you had been here my brother would not have died.” I get that honesty, who among us hasn’t thought, Lord, if only you had been here. If you had noticed if you had acted, I wouldn’t be in this room, I wouldn’t be in this pain. I imagine that statement would have wounded Jesus a bit, the sting of death is in the air, and isn’t Martha, right? He could command heaven's armies, and still Lazarus is dead. He says to her “Your brother will rise again.” And she replies, “I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day.” I feel for Martha here. Her reply feels like when someone says to me at a funeral, “You’ll see him again in Heaven someday.” I understand that that’s True, Martha understands that it is true, knows that is good news, but it feels a small comfort because that beloved brother is not here with her now, the grief and loss is real and present now.

Yet Jesus, keenly aware that there IS another story at work here, another story is even more true than Death, destroyer of worlds proclaims to Martha, ““I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” “Yes, I believe all of this.”

Martha then returns to the house and finds Mary, in the throng of people filling their home, sitting with them in their grief. “Jesus is here, she says, he’s calling for you.” And Mary gets up and dashes out the door, she needs to see Jesus, needs to be out of this room. Mary, never one to hold her emotions in check, never one to be subtle about her great love for Jesus, runs out the door. I imagine her throwing her arms around Jesus, great wracking sobs, all the feelings she’s been holding come spilling out, ““Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died.” When Jesus saw her crying and the Jews who had come with her crying also, he was deeply disturbed and troubled. He

asked, "Where have you laid him?" They replied, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to cry. The Jews said, "See how much he loved him!"

This passage gets me every time. The image of Jesus so overcome that he can't help but cry. Jesus, who fully knows that he is about to raise Lazarus from the dead, weeps. I love this image for two reasons. First, because Jesus knows the sting of losing someone, and he feels it. Hebrews 2:17 tells us, "For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people." What's more human than weeping at your friend's grave? What's more human than grappling with loss?

In theology, the concept of Jesus being both God and Human is called the Hypostatic union. It's a technical term in Christian theology employed in mainstream Christology to describe the union of Christ's humanity and divinity in one hypostasis, or individual personhood. The most basic explanation for the hypostatic union is Jesus Christ being both fully God and fully man. I don't pretend to be a great theologian, just ask my college professors, but I do know that I need both; I need a Jesus who is full human and fully God. I need a Jesus who has the power to raise someone, myself included from the dead. But I just as much need a Jesus who will weep at a graveside with me. A Jesus who says, "No, I get it. I see it too. This is broken, this is not how this is supposed to be, and I will wail my heart out right alongside you." I need both of those Jesus's. We

need both those Jesus'.

It's also in this story that we can see so clearly the two competing stories, the one in the newspaper and the one in scripture.

This is such a painfully millennial thing to say, but sometimes the Holy Spirit speaks to me through podcasts. When I was writing this sermon, which was a day later than usual because I was sick, my instagram told me that Kate Bowler had just released a new episode that day. Bowler interviewed the Reverend Dr. Tom Long, who, I learned, wrote THE book on funerals. Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral. Truly, it is such a beautiful conversation between Kate and Tom. I cried and also laughed out loud.

Tom says this beautiful profound statement about these two competing stories: Well, and this truth telling that we should be doing at funerals is especially important because there are two preachers at every funeral. Capital "D" Death comes to every funeral and loves to preach. And Death's sermon is the same every time. It's, "Damn every one of you. I win every time. You want the evidence, it's right there. I break all loving relationships. I destroy all community. You belong to me." And we (Preachers, Christians) have the duty and delight of standing there and saying, "Oh, death, where's your victory? Where's your sting? I tell you a mystery." We got to say that."

And that is EXACTLY what is happening in the story of Lazarus: Jesus hears the sermon that Death is preaching about his beloved, and he weeps. The story is so loud, that he weeps. This gives us all kinds of permission to weep too. There is no shame in grief. And then Jesus PREACHES the other story; Jesus tells the truth about what is real, and it is that God is a God of Resurrection, and of Life.

Jesus was deeply disturbed again when he came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone covered the entrance. Jesus said, "Remove the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said, "Lord, the smell will be awful! He's been dead four days." Jesus replied, "Didn't I tell you that if you believe, you will see God's glory?" So they removed the stone. Jesus looked up and said, "Father, thank you for hearing me. I know you always hear me. I say this for the benefit of the crowd standing here so that they will believe that you sent me." Having said this, Jesus shouted with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Untie him and let him go." Therefore, many of the Jews who came with Mary and saw what Jesus did believed in him.

What moves me about this Story is how beautifully it illustrates the idea of two Stories, two truths being spoken in our world and in our lives. We need to see both, we need to live with our eyes and our hearts wide open, all while "not forgetting which story is true." Which story we have received from Jesus. Which story we build our hope upon.

The Story of the Death and Resurrection of Lazarus juxtaposes these two stories very well, but we can extrapolate this idea out into so, so many things. Relationship. World

Events. Church Life. Our own hearts. The late Rachel Held Evans in her book, *Searching for Sunday*, wrote this, "It's just death and resurrection, over and over again, day after day, as God reaches down into our deepest graves and with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead wrests us from our pride, our apathy, our fear, our prejudice, our anger, our hurt, and our despair. "

And that, for me, is why Lent and Easter are so important for the Christian Tradition, for me as pastor, and for us as followers of Jesus. We get to tell the story, act out the story, perform the story of when Jesus told us the truth about who he is and, therefore, who God is. When we go without for Lent, when we wave palm branches, when we take communion, and we arise with the dawn on Easter we are telling the Story, that one that is true. We are saying to ourselves and to our sisters and brothers here in this room that nothing is impossible for our Good God.

Amen. Let's Pray.