Open the Eyes of My Heart

the story of lazarus

[video: "Ray Stevens—Sittin' up with the Dead] – 3:43min

John chapter 11.

A story of friendship and loss.

A story of belief and trust.

A story of hope and life.

A story of Jesus and the glory of God.

Read John 11:1-2

[1]Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. [2]This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.

In case you don't know who "Mary" is, she's the one who wiped [Jesus'] feet with her hair. If you are reading John in order, in chronology, you don't know this story until chapter 12. Almost like the author knows that his audience knows who "this Mary" is already. And even if you don't know, you will find out soon enough. It's almost like the author doesn't care about chronology, telling events in order of time. Critics of the legitimacy of the Bible say: "this is a problem! This is how we know that the Bible is not accurate! There are thousands of these little instances in Scripture!"

Well, that would assume that God was interested in our chronology, and perhaps, limited by it—chronology. Whenever I read the Revelation of Jesus—you know, that freaky, cool book at the end of our Bibles—I am reminded that God isn't so interested in our chronology, rather, he is interested in our theology—the study of the non-chronological—GOD.

It's almost like God doesn't take the things in this world as seriously as we do! Perhaps the author of John is more concerned about something else, rather than chronology. Maybe it is not the natural, but the "super" natural. Perhaps it's things we cannot see with our eyes, but rather things we CAN see with our hearts, that God seems to want.

Well anyway…

Read John 11:3-16

[3]So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

[4]When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." [5]Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. [6]Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.

[7]Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

[8] "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?"

[9] Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. [10] It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light."

[11] After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

[12] His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." [13] Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

[14] So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, [15] and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

[16] Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

You know, if I was a disciple of Jesus, there would have been a point in time where I would have blown my gasket: "Jesus! Stop it! Stop assuming we are smarter than we are! We don't get a word you say, unless you explain yourself! We're pretty dumb, you know! We're fishermen and IRS agents and rednecks with shotguns for crying out loud! We ain't smart like them religious folks! So why don't you just jump to the explaining part and quit making us look even more stupid! If Lazarus was dead, just say that—'dead'. Don't go around making us think he's just taking a snooze!"

Good thing I wasn't a disciple, eh? Wait, I am. Or at least I thought I was… maybe the disciples and US take chronology too seriously as well. Maybe we take the things of this world too seriously.

It seems to me now, that perhaps Jesus saying that Lazarus was asleep was more real than him being dead. Especially because we know the end of the story. Or at least we think we do…

Thomas, the Didymus, never quits openin' up his dumb mouth: "let's go die with him." Speak for yourself, Thomas Didymus! I don't think the disciples are picking up what Jesus is throwing down, do you? I mean, c'mon!

Well, come to think of it… we don't pick up what Jesus is throwing down much either, do we?

"thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth (in chronology) as it is I heaven (non-chronology)." That's Matthew the IRS agent that recorded that prayer of Jesus to God the Father…it's like actually **seeing** the supernatural (heaven) touching the natural (earth). And maybe that is what the disciples (and us) often forget. Our mission as Followers of Jesus in this natural, chronological world, is to enact or do the supernatural world of heaven right here.

It's like Jacob's dream in the Old Testament book of Genesis where he sees "a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God, were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD…" (**Genesis 28:12-13**).

I wonder if the "connection" between heaven and earth, the supernatural and the natural, is found in having eyes to see and ears to hear. Funny… Jesus said that a lot to his followers. If they didn't get something he said (the supernatural), he would say: "He who has ears let him hear. He who has eyes to see, let him see."

That's got to be extremely frustrating for the recipient, eh? I mean, what if Pastor Mark stepped up here each Sunday morning and started talking in parables, mysterious sayings and stories… what if he read from the Bible and talked about a lot of spiritual, supernatural kind of things! Then at the end of the talk he said: "Let him who has ears, let him hear… eyes to see, let him see!"

You'd probably last a couple of weeks and then get really frustrated! You'd find that short little, happy man, and…! Anger.

Or maybe you just die in your heart and mind. Hearing that supernatural stuff all the time might just make you not care anymore. Your heart dies, your mind is numb, and you find yourself for many years, sliding into a chair every Sunday morning because it's tradition. Apathy.

Kind of like Thomas Didymus again: "We might as well die, too."

Well anyway, Jesus arrives at the town of Bethany…

Read John 11:17-27

17 On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.
18 Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, 19 and many Jews had come to Martha and
Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was
coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

21 "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But I
know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

24 Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

FAITH.

25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even
though he dies; 26 and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

In other words, "Do you REALLY believe I am who I say that I am?

[27]"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

The Gospel of John is kind of a confusing book. It's not like the other Gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the synoptic Gospels—they "display a high degree of similarity in content, narrative arrangement, language, and sentence and paragraph structures" … and they were most likely written from the same point of view. It is hypothesized that Mark was written first and Matthew and Luke borrowed from its provided content as a starting point to fill in necessary gaps. Content unique to both Matthew and Luke are thought to be either uniquely original or they both borrowed from another source document named "Q" – so named because it is a hypothetical document that does not currently exist, albeit in theory.

The Gospel of John does not have any of these constraints. It is almost like the author of John had a completely different intention for picking up the pen to write. Interestingly, we know what that is! The author of John tells us! He doesn't tell us at the beginning, but rather at the end: *"But these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name"* (**John 20:31**). John's author goes on to say: *"Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written"* (**John 21:25**).

John is written not to give an accounting of the life of Jesus. Rather, John wants his readers to believe in Jesus… believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God… and the believing will bring LIFE!

So, perhaps, this story of the death of Lazarus is not about his death or even his resurrection. Rather it is about Jesus. It is about believing in Jesus.

So, when Martha says: *"Yes, Lord," … "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."* the author of John is going: YES! SEE! I TOLD YOU SO!! JESUS IS THE CHRIST! BELIEVE IN HIM AND YOU WILL HAVE LIFE!!!

Which really stinks if you are Lazarus… well, maybe not…

Read John 11:28-37

[28]And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." [29]When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. [30]Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. [31]When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

[32]When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

[33]When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. [34]"Where have you laid him?" he asked.
"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

[35]Jesus wept.

[36]Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

[37]But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

[storybook: "Papa's Gift"] – first part

I imagine that almost everyone in this room has been touched by death. And I imagine that almost everyone knows what it feels like to lose someone they love, like Papa Clarence. I also imagine that it is extremely comforting to know, not just in our mind, but also in our heart, that Jesus knows what it feels like to lose someone close to him.

For those going through a loss, I imagine there is much comfort in the two simple words, Jesus wept. Knowing that our God knows what it feels like to lose, grants us much hope as well. I wonder if those simple words not only speak of love and loss, but also of hope.

You know this story makes me cringe, not because of a loss, but of a potential loss. You see, my daughter Sari, calls her grandpa, Papa. And even though her Papa lives 1500 miles away, Sari has a very special and close relationship with her Papa. I have never seen Sari act so loyal and devoted to anyone other than her Papa. A couple of weeks ago, when Papa and Nana and uncle Mason came to visit for her birthday, it was not an unusual sight to see her cuddled up in the recliner with her Papa smiling and laughing, holding a popsicle or a book, as her Papa lavished love and attention on his grandchild. I looked on with a twinge of jealousy, because I don't even get that kind of love from Sari! It is really special. But when I read this story again, for me the names were Sari and Papa Brian. My father-in-law is not dead, he is very much alive… but that is what is so discomforting for me… eventually he will die! And Sari will have to go through the pain and loss of her much beloved Papa and there will be a void in her heart that he and only he could fill. Eventually we all die…

Honestly, I do not wish my father-in-law's early demise. I get along quite well with my in-laws. But do you see the point. My heart aches because eventually we ALL suffer loss. In this natural world, everything dies! Lazarus, pet hamsters, goldfish, dogs and cats, husbands and wives, children, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, and even those we never like in this world… ALL DIE!

Read John 11:38-44

38 Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. 39 "Take away the stone," he said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

40 Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

There's that "glorification of God" statement again… didn't he say that earlier? "*This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it"* (John 11:4).

41 So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

43 When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

No way! Did you hear what I just heard? Did you see what I just saw? Seriously?! A man dead for four days just came back to life! How can one miss that? Why wouldn't everyone, everywhere believe in the GLORY OF GOD and put their faith in Jesus? He just raised a man back to life! UNBELIEVABLE!

Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

[storybook: "Papa's Gift"] – second part

What do you pray? For things you can see with your eyes…? Or things you can see with your heart…? The things of this world…the earth? Or the things of heaven…of God?

I wonder if we don't take this world too seriously. I wonder if Jesus thinks so… because I bet that most of reading this story would think it is about Lazarus' death and resurrection, of Jesus comforting his friends and displaying what God can do through miracles…and you would be right…kind of. The death and resurrection of Lazarus was something they could see with their eyes, right? I wonder if God had more in mind from this event.

A theology professor wrote this:

> "To understand Jesus' behavior and the opportunity he sees in all this, we must recognize that in John's Gospel, *glory* and *glorified* are code words for the crucifixion. In this Gospel, Jesus dies death by exaltation, and his crucifixion is the hour of his glorification. Lazarus' illness will lead to death, all right; when Jesus finally does arrive, his friend's corpse will stink to high heaven. But something much larger will have begun. Lazarus' death will help to bring on Jesus crucifixion, aka his glorification—and not only his, but God's" (Frederick Niedner, Christian Century: Reflections on the Lectionary, February 26, 2008, pg. 21).

Read John 11:45-53

45 Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put
their faith in him. 46 But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had
done. 47 Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

"What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous
signs. 48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will
come and take away both our place[c] and our nation."

49 Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know
nothing at all! 50 You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people
than that the whole nation perish."

51 He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would
die for the Jewish nation, 52 and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of
God, to bring them together and make them one. 53 So from that day on they plotted to take
his life.

The same theology professor says:

> "How odd that Jesus would raise his friend from death only to enroll him in a brief venture that would get them both killed. Jesus might as well have shouted into that tomb, 'Ready or not, here I come! Get ready for some company, Lazarus.' That's precisely where Jesus was headed. In a few more days, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus would lay Jesus in a tomb, dead as a doornail but at the same time glorified almost beyond recognition.
> "To al the rest of us, Jesus' summons at the tomb where each of us will one day lie sounds something like: 'Come out of there, friend. Come with me. We're going up to Jerusalem. So much for ordinary dying from disease, accidents or plain wearing out. So much for living with the sole agenda of not dying and desperately extending our days. Let's go instead to where we can give our lives away. Come die with me'" (Frederick Niedner, Christian Century: Reflections on the Lectionary, February 26, 2008, pg. 21).

What is God up to in Jesus? What is God doing in this world through Jesus? Look to the glorified Jesus to find out… continually find out… not only what God has done, but what God is continually doing in this world… on earth as it is in heaven.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear. She who has eyes to see, let her see.

Let's pray.

Benediction

You know, I find it humorous that at the end of John, Thomas Didymus (the one who wanted to die with Lazarus) was the disciple who didn't believe that the other disciples had seen the resurrected Jesus. *"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it"* **(John 20:25**). Thomas Didymus regrets those words when he sees Jesus… especially when Jesus says: *"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed"* (**John 20:29**).

So walk away from this morning BELEIVING even if you haven't SEEN anything. God is real, Jesus wants a relationship with you, and the Holy Spirit desires to be with you always. Believe.

Amen.