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Walking into Danger and Death

John 11:1-45

We just were not ready. Not prepared. We couldn't imagine a virus that would force us to shut down life as usual, or a virus that could kill us so unexpectedly. We just are never ready. Odd, isn't it, how all of us are caught off guard by illness, suffering and death? We are never ready for that.

Maybe in Jesus' day, people didn't live as long and maybe that made death more normal. But, in our day, we can fix that. Our joints wear out? We just replace them. Our hearts malfunction? There is a pill for that. Cancer? Who is the best oncologist you know? Even in our late 90's we would like a little more time. We are never ready for illness, suffering and death.

Martha and Mary were not ready for their brother, Lazarus to die. They were worried enough to send word to Jesus about Lazarus' illness. But death somehow always catches us off guard.

And Jesus, who in the chapter just before this one, has only barely escaped an attempt to stone him by many of the residents of Jerusalem, Jesus decides to walk right back to Bethany to be closer to the grief, death and danger that is there. And the thing that disciples of Jesus always do is to go with Jesus whenever he does that. They don't understand why Jesus wants to put himself in such danger, but they decide that wherever Jesus goes, they will go too. The disciple Thomas says, "Well, if Jesus is going back towards Jerusalem to die, then we need to go too." And so disciples of Jesus have always done . . . walked with Jesus into places they would not otherwise choose to go.

And when Jesus gets to Bethany, both Martha and Mary say the same thing to him. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." The wonderful and the frustrating part about Scripture is that it is written, so we don't hear or know their tone and inflection. When

Martha and Mary said this to Jesus, was it an accusation? Or was it a faith statement? Scripture lets us choose and so whether we find ourselves today saying, “Jesus, YOU COULD fix this virus!” or “Jesus YOU alone could FIX this virus.” – either way we find ourselves with Martha and Mary today – worried, grief stricken and unprepared for life after such loss.

And either way – Jesus does this remarkable thing. Jesus doesn’t defend. “Martha, you know that I have been really busy!” Or, you know that the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem have it out for me and I couldn’t come sooner for fear of my own life.” Jesus does this remarkable thing. Jesus steps closer to Martha and to Mary. Jesus steps into their grief and loss. Jesus feels their pain and cries with them. This idea of a God who feels our pain and who steps into our grief is essential if we are going to understand and believe in the God we find in Jesus. God comes to us in our fear, in our isolation, in our grief, and in our anger and he steps closer to us, speaking words of life and love and weeping with us.

And the reaction to this God is so typically human. Some who see God do this, who see God’s love and compassion and say, “Wow! God really did love Lazarus!” But others of us see the exact same thing and say, “Crying?! Really!? Isn’t that just too little too late?!”

But those of us who run to meet Jesus and who throw ourselves at Jesus’ feet when we are grieving, to us God says, “I AM the resurrection and the life.” With us, God weeps. In the person of Jesus Christ, God takes a step towards us – knowing very well that to do so is to step right into death, danger, grief and pain. God comes towards us!

And whenever God comes closer to us, the action always invites us to move from death to life, from grief to joy and from fear to commitment. The invitation is there, but we don’t always respond. Because even though, in Christ, God has come to earth to share in our sorrow and grief, God doesn’t force anybody to believe in the power of life and love.

In fact, when Jesus brings Lazarus back to life – When Jesus restores to Martha and Mary their beloved brother – in that act Jesus BOTH prefigures his own death and resurrection that will happen in a few chapters, AND Jesus also sets into motion the events that will ensure that he will be crucified. Right after Lazarus walks out of the tomb alive – after 4 days of being dead – MANY of those who saw what happened believed that Jesus was God. But SOME went straight to the Religious leaders to report Jesus’ infraction. In giving Lazarus life, Jesus sealed his own death. Because God always gives us a choice about how we will respond.

Somehow, in ways that I cannot fully understand, Life and death, grief and joy, anxiety and faith are all very close together. Belief and cynicism exist side by side. Many believed, but not all.

So, right here, just 2 weeks before our Easter celebrations, as you listen to me in the isolation of your own homes, right here - life and death are very close together. Fear and Faith are all mixed up together. Danger and Compassion co-exist in ways that are suddenly very clear. And – probably – that is always the way life is. We just see it more clearly when grief, fear and danger get close to us.

The message of John's Gospel, and the truth that Martha, Mary, Lazarus and I have experienced is that God sees, knows and feels our grief, fear and suffering and takes a step closer to us. The truth of Christ is that when "I AM the resurrection and the life" shows up, you and I have the choice to step closer to Jesus – which can be a very dangerous place to be. But we can choose that life, or we can take a step back and stay in our comfortable cynicism, our known grief and the fear that will lead us to betray anyone who has the temerity, the audacity, to walk towards death and danger out of love.

We are never ready. But God is ever ready. And today, I want you to know that God knows our grief, knows our worry, sees our fear, and offers us compassion, presence and life. WE only have only to fall at his feet and be willing to believe that God is stronger than all the danger, death and fear we face. It doesn't mean that we will not die or suffer. But it does mean that both in this life and in the eternal life, love, compassion and life are stronger than even death and suffering. "I AM the resurrection and the life" has taken a step towards us. The news is good – the news is very good.

You are known. You are loved. You are claimed. You are redeemed.