

“How Do You Know When It’s Morning?”

John 11:1-45 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might learn to recognize the signs of your work in our world, bringing light and life. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Well, that wasn’t even the whole chapter, but it was more verses than we had last week when we read all of chapter nine. The lectionary scriptures this year are asking a lot of us. Or I guess you could say they’re offering a lot. There are so many things we could talk about after reading this story. There is what it suggests about how people come to believe, whether “signs and wonders” influence us to follow Jesus. There is the power of Martha’s confession and what it means that the writer of John’s gospel puts those pivotal words into the mouth of a woman. There is the importance of weeping together when grief comes to call, rather than trying to manage our sorrow and pain in isolation. Or perhaps we could be drawn to reflect on the most touching part of this story: what it means that Jesus wept openly for his friend, though he’d already declared to his disciples that Lazarus would not remain dead.

We could spend six weeks here, easy, but instead, we’re going to notice that it’s the Sunday before Palm Sunday and recognize that the purpose of reading this story today, on the fifth Sunday of Lent, is that it’s a warm-up exercise for Holy Week. The death of Lazarus is foreshadowing Jesus’ impending crucifixion and resurrection. This

whole episode is a practice run for not surrendering to hopelessness when it seems that all is lost. If we were to zoom out just a bit, and read the verses before chapter 11 begins, we would have heard about the threats Jesus had just received in Jerusalem, when “stones were taken up” in response to his claim that he was the Son of God. This is why, in verse 8, the disciples are so surprised that he wants to go back. And then, there is that moment in verse 16, when the writer is intentionally trying to confuse us by having Thomas say, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” The verses just before that had Jesus explicitly explaining that Lazarus had died, but is Lazarus the one Thomas was offering to join in death? Not really. All of this narration before they arrive back in Bethany is showing us how the disciples were coming to realize that Jesus might be killed, and soon.

But then they get to Bethany, and yes, it turns out Lazarus is dead. He’s been dead for four days, meaning that according to Jewish tradition at the time, his soul wasn’t even hanging around any longer. Friends and family from far and wide have gathered to join Martha and Mary in their mourning. The plea is no longer, “Rabbi, please heal my brother so he doesn’t die,” for that moment has passed. As far as the observers can tell, all Jesus can do at this point is join in with the weeping. And he does. It seems hope is lost.

Or does it? When Martha comes out to meet Jesus as he’s arriving, she begins with an accusation: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” But

in the very next breath, even in her grief, she opens herself to other possibilities, saying, “but even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” She’s praying for a miracle—and boldly, because she knows herself to be in the presence of a miracle-maker.

Martha and Mary’s grief for their brother is real. Jesus’ compassion for them is real. But the whole story, when put into the larger context of the gospel, is also about something more. It is trying to help us strengthen our hoping muscles. And that is a lesson that we need today as much as Martha and Mary did back then.

As you may have noticed, it was almost 100° on Friday. We were supposed to go to the Farmers Market here in La Mesa to spread hope. This is our third round of this. Back in November, in the two weeks leading up to Thanksgiving, we offered people stickers and a marker, so they could fill in what they were grateful for. It was a good way to start because most people understand the power of being intentional about gratitude. Leading up to Christmas, we had new stickers that said “BLANK gives me joy.” That took a little more thought for some, but people still responded well. The stickers for these weeks leading up to Easter though, may be more of a challenge. These stickers say “BLANK gives me hope.” I fear that we are living in times when people are feeling like hope is hard to find. So maybe that’s why we were given this story today. Maybe that’s why it was so hot we had to cancel on Friday. Maybe we’re supposed to start this challenge today, here, amongst ourselves.

So let's all take a sticker. We've got some markers. You can fill it out now; I encourage you to do that, so we can share our ideas with one another. Or if you're not ready, you can take it home and ponder on this in your heart. You could even start a list in your journal. The thing about hope, as this story tries to tell us, is that it's not obvious. "Hope that is seen is not hope," Paul wrote in Romans. Hope is not about the way things are right now; it's about the way things can become. But it's not just empty daydreaming. The power of hope is how it influences how we live. To believe something is possible changes our capacity to make things possible. It helps us tap into the power of God's compassion and justice and mercy in ways we can't if we don't embrace God's vision for a better world. As Jim Wallis puts it, "Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, and then watching the evidence change." This is hope as a spiritual discipline, rather than a feeling. This isn't Palm Sunday hope; it's Easter hope, the kind that has been through the despair of Good Friday and come out on the other side.

That is the hope that Jesus was helping his friends Martha and Mary practice when he delayed coming to Lazarus' aid and then wept alongside them. It seemed as though all was darkness, but Jesus was clear that he was operating in the light of day. It struck me as so interesting that he specifically mentioned that there are 12 hours of daylight. Bethany isn't much closer to the equator than we are, so it makes sense that he was saying this right around this same time of year, when we've just had the spring

equinox. If we wanted to get really literal about it, there aren't always 12 hours of daylight, but right now there are. But Jesus isn't actually being all that literal, is he? His point is that our works of compassion and deeds of mercy bring light and life to the world. There is the old Hasidic Jewish story about the rabbi who asks his students how we know when morning has come. One suggests that it's when you can see the sheep on the hillside. Another says it's when you can tell the difference between a fig tree and a grapevine. But no, the rabbi says, it's not about being able to find the differences between things. Morning comes when we can look into the face of a fellow human being and there is enough light within us to see our sibling there.

Faith traditions love to play with metaphors of light and dark. Ramadan begins with the new moon, that is, the day when there really isn't any moon to be seen at all. It just ended this week, when the next new moon arrived. At the same time, Persian New Year, or Nowrouz, also came this week with the new moon. It seems safe to assume a new year represents a time of hope, new beginnings and such. So it's important to notice that these seasons of faith and culture actually begin in the darkness.

And lest we be tempted to dismiss these other faith traditions and cultures using the lunar cycle as backward and superstitious, let's remember that Easter is on its way, because the spring equinox has now passed, and Easter is scheduled on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the equinox. Theoretically, if Lent is six weeks, rough

calculations would mean Lent often also starts around a new moon, in the darkness.

For indeed, if we are practicing hope, we must start when it's harder to find. We must try harder to see family in the faces of strangers. We must weep with those who weep, while holding onto the possibility of solace.

So how do you know when it's morning? What gives you hope? Did you fill out your sticker? Feel free to cross out the "s" if you need to, to make it more grammatically correct. Will you wear it to lunch or the store or wherever you're going after this? How does it change the world if we try a little harder to spread hope? Which shadowy corners can we bring light into?

We might read the words of the psalmist saying "my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning" and assume this is a posture of complacent wishful thinking. But people watch for the morning because they believe and trust and know that morning always comes. If we wait for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, it means that we believe and trust and know that God will act, has acted, is acting. We may not be expecting resurrections of our loved ones who pass, but there are plenty of other seemingly hopelessly broken things in our lives that need mending. To practice hope is to choose to believe that the world can be different, and to live as though we can join God in making things better. It may seem dark now, but the moon will grow, the dawn will come; the light will shine in the darkness and it will not be overcome. May it be so. Amen.