

A Storytelling Commentary on John 11:1-45

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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."

But when Jesus heard it, 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.
Then after this he 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?"

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."

After saying this, he told 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."

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.
But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

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

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

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

When she 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 she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.

Now Jesus had not yet come to the village,
but was still at the place where Martha had met him.
When 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 to 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."
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 wept.

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?"

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."
Jesus said to her, "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."
Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary
and had seen what Jesus did,
believed in him.

This is a long and complex story, probably the longest story in the whole lectionary in terms of learning the story but it is an extraordinarily powerful story and it is not difficult to learn if you recognize the structure. The first six episodes present Jesus and the disciples talking about Lazarus' illness and his death. It is a series of enigmatic sayings about why is he staying, why is he going back, why is he not saying clearly that Lazarus had died? The questions of the disciples and the overall issue of Lazarus being ill and dying drive it.

The second section is the conversation with Martha. The location of this conversation is outside Bethany and it is introduced by Martha's statement, "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died." The climax of that section is Martha saying "Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Thus, it ends with a confession of belief.

Mary's conversation with Jesus is the third section of the story and it ends with the response of the Jews to Jesus weeping, "See how he loved him" but some of them said, 'Couldn't he that opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'" This section of the story establishes a highly sympathetic relationship with the Jews as a character in the story.

The last section is the raising of Lazarus, which ends with, "Many of the Jews believed in him." It is important to note that two of the sections end with statements of belief, first by Martha and then by many of the Jews. The structure of the story is then disciples, Martha, Mary, and the raising of Lazarus. Each of these sections has a discernable beginning and ending. Recognizing that is the first step in learning the story.

Another structure of memory that is built into the story is the verbal threads. The first section has the verbal thread of Lazarus' illness. The section begins with that theme; "a certain man was ill." The beginning of the second episode is: "this illness does not lead to death." Notice that the illness is the beginning and end of the first episode, "a certain man was ill" then ends with "he whom you love is ill." Likewise in the second episode, the beginning and ending are about the illness. In this case Jesus heard it and said, "this illness does not lead to death" and at the end, "after having heard that heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer." In the first two episodes then, the verbal thread of Lazarus being ill is the connecting thread.

In the last two episodes, a verbal thread is "falling asleep." The episode begins with the phrase "our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep" and the disciples respond, "if he's fallen asleep, he'll be all right." It ends with "they thought he was referring merely to sleep." The theme of Lazarus' death is another verbal thread that links the Martha conversation

with what follows. The phrase "Lazarus is dead" begins the last episode of the first section. And then Martha says, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died" and Mary says the same thing, so that this verbal thread is the first words for both Martha and Mary. This verbal thread is completed when Martha says "he has been dead for four days."

The most important verbal thread throughout the whole story is "that you may believe" or just "believing." At the end of the first section in Jesus' discussion with the disciples, he says, "for your sake I am glad I was not there so that you may believe." And then with Martha he says, "those who believe in me, even though they die, will live" and "everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" and "do you believe this?" and she responds "yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah." Then in Jesus' prayer he says, "I've said this for the sake of the crowd standing here that they may believe that you sent me" and it ends with "many of the Jews who had come with Mary and seen what he had done believed in him." Thus, the verbal thread of believing in him is the single most important verbal thread throughout the whole story.

Another verbal thread is the consolation of the Jews. The Martha section begins with this setting: "many of the Jews had come to Mary and Martha to console them about their brother" The thread is picked up again early in the second episode of the Mary section, "when the Jews who were with her in the house consoling her." This verbal thread establishes "the Jews" as a sympathetic character.

Another verbal thread is Jesus being greatly disturbed or troubled. This verbal thread is an inside view of the most emotionally intense dimension of the characterization of Jesus. The first is the climax of his tearful conversation with Mary: "He was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." The second is the introduction to the raising of Lazarus: "when they came to the tomb, Jesus again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb."

Finally, "weeping" is a verbal thread at the end of the Mary episodes: "they followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there," "when Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her, also weeping," and then "Jesus wept."

While this story is long and complex, it is not difficult to learn. As usual, the key is to pay attention to the structure of the story and to weave together the verbal threads as guides through the story.

Now the dynamics of this story: the first section is about Lazarus being ill and the discussions between Jesus and the disciples. This section creates a series of puzzles that are then solved later on in the story. The puzzles are created by the provocative and strange things that Jesus says: he decides to stay an additional two days, Lazarus has just fallen asleep, and he's going to awaken him. The disciples and the listeners don't know what any of this means. As a result, the whole section, including Jesus' statement "Aren't there twelve hours of daylight and those who walk during the day don't stumble because they see the light," creates a mystery. What does this mean? What is he talking about?

What sense does it make? The puzzle of what he means by saying that Lazarus has fallen asleep is solved at the end of the section when first the storyteller explains to the audience that he was talking about Lazarus' death and then Jesus says to the disciples, "Lazarus is dead." The challenge of the first section is to make these puzzles as provocative as possible.

The second part is the conversation with Martha. The tone of her statement, "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died," has an implication of criticism. Even though she concludes with "even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him," the tone implies that Jesus had been absent when they needed him the most. Jesus' response to her implicit critique is "Your brother will rise again" and she says, probably with a tone of *déjà vu*, "Yes, yes I know that he'll rise again in the resurrection on the last day" and Jesus' response "I am the resurrection and the life... Do you believe this?" It ends with her statement of belief without any tone of qualification or skepticism: "Yes, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is coming into the world." That statement of belief is a verbal thread with the first chapter in which Philip says to Nathaniel, "We have found the Messiah." This is a highly significant confession of belief.

The section with Mary is about weeping. It is a moment of deep identification with Jesus as a human being as he weeps with Mary and for Lazarus. Its impact is analogous to the Gethsemane story in the Synoptic passion narratives. In the Gospel of John, this is the moment of greatest human intimacy with Jesus. A sign of its importance is that the sentence has only three words in Greek: *edakrusen o Iasous*, and in English, "Jesus wept." This is a climactic point in this section of the story. The two responses of the Jews close the episode, the first sympathetic and the second more cynical.

The dynamic of the last section, the raising of Lazarus, is the experience of Jesus' authority and power over death in his commands "take away the stone," "Lazarus, come out!," "unbind him and let him go." Each one of the episodes has some exercise of power by Jesus. This is Jesus' most explicit action of power and authority. It is significant in relation to the Messianic tradition that Jesus' victory is not killing somebody like Goliath but is giving life to someone. Jesus' power here is the power of life, not the power of death. This is a paradigmatic shift in the Messianic tradition of the warrior.

Jesus' prayer—"I thank you for having heard me. I know that you always hear me but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here—" has a two-level meaning. It is addressed first to Jesus' listeners standing at Lazarus' tomb in 33 C. E. and also to John's audiences standing around the Johannine storytellers listening to the story in the late first century. Actually there is a sense in which it has three levels of meaning because it is also addressed to your listeners in the early 21st century. In order to make this connection for your listeners, pray Jesus' prayer in the ancient manner with hands outstretched and eyes open looking at your listeners: "I am saying this for the sake of the people who are standing here right now that they may believe that you sent me." Thus, you are

presenting Jesus as he talks to God and to your listeners. And just as the climax of this is that many of the Jews believed in him, so also the invitation of the Johannine storyteller then and now is that the audience will join with the Jews who come to believe in him..

The overall dynamic of the story is to invite the listeners to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. The listener is invited to move from pondering the puzzles of the first section through sympathetic identification with Martha, Mary and Jesus as they grieve Lazarus' death to sharing the joy and belief of the crowd at the raising of Lazarus to new life. This story is structured then, to invite the audience to believe in him, based on an experience of extreme human intimacy at the same time there is this statement of his being the resurrection and the life, the Messiah, the Son of God.