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Lent 5A

David Malina¹

Text: Ezekiel 37, John 11:1-45

Lazarus dies. And his sisters Mary and Martha, and his close friend Jesus, all grieve. The text just bluntly says: Jesus “weeps.” Weeping. The text also says that Jesus is “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.”

We don't often picture Jesus, of all people, lost in a moment of uncontrollable grief, deep and profound sadness. And yet there he is: fully human, experiencing the messy anguish we all do, and will, sooner or later, when we grieve someone we love. We typically turn our attention to the last part of the story: the miracle of Jesus resurrecting Lazarus to new life. We're fascinated with this mind-boggling miracle.

Coupled with the vivid, spine-chilling scene in the Ezekiel passage of dry bones clattering together to create warm, live, flesh-and-blood human beings, we are confronted with the arresting notion of the amazing power of God, the power to create life, out of nothing.

The Bible is full of “miracles.” In the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the New Testament, we're frequently confronted with the unimaginable, surprising and extraordinary power of God...seemingly defying all ‘normal’ scientific patterns of nature. But I wonder if indeed, the primary intention of the miracles Jesus performs is to ‘shock and awe’ us with spectacular demonstrations of divine power. I'm wondering if that's really the point ... or ... if, through these miracles, there's something else the Holy One wishes to impress upon us. It's not the spectacular power of the miracle we're supposed to be all wowed by.

It's the love behind it...around it...driving it.
It's the love that has the lasting significance.

Yes, Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the dead. But Lazarus wasn't going to live forever. A few years later, he'd die again. Yes, Jesus heals the sick. But as time passed, they'd get sick again with some other disease. Yes, Jesus multiplies two loaves and two fish to feed thousands of people. But the next day, these thousands would go hungry, again.

The miracles of Jesus are short-term, temporary events. But the real, lasting, permanent impression, is Christ's love behind it, around it, driving his actions. The fact that Jesus weeps deeply at the loss of his friend Lazarus, and that he then raises him to new life, shows more than anything else, the deep and abiding love he has for Lazarus, and the care and compassion he has for the family and friends who were grieving...which prompts his miraculous action.

But it's the love he has for them, in their most sorrowful and despairing moment, that has the lasting impression. And the neat thing about it, is that this divine love of the Holy One, continues to be directed to us... and now lives on in our hearts. We are the Body of

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Christ, the hands and feet of Jesus in the world spreading love ... all the while being animated, energized by the Holy Spirit of God.

Mother Teresa talks about doing even the little things with love, which can make a huge difference, and make a lasting, permanent impression. She says, "We don't need to be doing great things, only small things with great love. It's not how much you do, but how much love you put into doing it. It's easy to be enraptured and gob smacked by the spectacular, flashy big things ... and believe that's what it's all about. We focus on the razzle and dazzle of the big and miraculous. We focus on the big "five-year plan," exponential growth, the "big, hairy, audacious goal."

But, Jesus focuses on loving relationships.

Someone once said, "Everyone wants a revolution, but nobody wants to do the dishes." We can wax eloquently and preach endlessly about the poetry and beauty of love, or about the importance of compassionate acts of justice and service around the world. But if we don't do the dishes at home ... if we don't speak kindly to one another in our work places...or offer a drive to a friend ... or be on time for a meeting ... or adjust our schedule to accommodate someone's need ... or help clean the kitchen ... if we don't do the little things with love...are we really following the prodding of the Spirit, the nudge of the Holy One, the whispering call of Jesus?

Those with whom we live in community – at home, at work, at church – will know we love them when we show them love in concrete action. Maybe that's what Jesus was up to when he washed his disciples' feet. Who knows? Perhaps today, might he be pulling the hair out of the plugged-up shower drain, or some other chore no one else wants to do.

And isn't that what really matters?

Awareness that the Holy One is right there with us, fully present and active ... not only in our ordinary routines and activities, but also and especially as we stand on the dry bones of sadness and despair, even as we weep in seeming hopeless anguish at the loss of a loved one, even as we cry out of the depths. And that little, simple, hint of awareness, is enough ... enough to pull us forward, to take that next step forward, to continue to live with hope, creativity, and compassion ... enough to help us see signs of resurrection and life abundant around us, signs reminding us that the God of life, love and light, is most certainly still out there and most powerful.

I like the story of the little boy who was afraid of the dark. One night, his mother tells him to go out to the back porch, and bring her the broom. The little boy turns to his mother and says, "Mom, I don't want to go out there. It's dark!" Mom smiles reassuringly. "You don't have to be afraid of the dark," she explains. "Jesus is out there. He'll look after you and protect you." The little boy looks at his mom real hard, and asks, "Are you sure he's out there?" "Yes, I'm sure," says the mom. "He's everywhere, and he's always ready to help you when you need him." The little boy thinks about this for a moment, and then goes to the back door, and cracks it open a little. And he says out loud, into the dark, "Jesus? If you're out there, would you please hand me the broom?"

God is most certainly with us "in the dark," a lamp to our feet, a light to our path ... showing us the way forward, one step at a time.