

On this first Sunday of Lent, I am starting a new series of sermons on the resurrection of Lazarus. We begin by remembering that rising to a new life is not exactly what we had in mind.

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We don't think of Jesus as being the kind of person who had friends. We know he had disciples. He had people around him who wanted something—often healing. He had the crowds, at least for a while. And he certainly had enemies. But friends? We assume he was too busy with Messiah stuff for that kind of thing.

The Gospels make it clear that Jesus did have close friends. Among them were the sisters Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus. Apparently, Jesus went to their house often. He had dinner with them and stayed with them when he was in Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem. And verse five of our text tells us plainly that Jesus “loved” this family.

Can you imagine thinking of Jesus not only as the incarnation of God and the Savior who reveals God's love for the world, but also as your friend? In John chapter fifteen, Jesus is recorded saying “I don't call you servants, but friends.” This statement is made about all the followers of Christ, not just the first disciples. So, the living Jesus Christ also considers you to be a friend. But what does that mean? Do you get special treatment from your friend the Savior? Will Jesus hurry when he hears you are in trouble because, after all, you're friends?

One day when Jesus was out of town, his friend Lazarus became gravely sick. So the sisters sent word to Jesus saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” The response of Jesus to this message is confusing: “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.” That's not what we were expecting. We expected the text to say, “Since Jesus loved them, he hurried back to Bethany to heal Lazarus.”

When preachers get stuck on a passage like this, our tendency is to look at the original Greek text. But a tight translation of this passage says, “Jesus loved Mary and her sister and, Lazarus, *so* after hearing Lazarus was sick, he stayed two days longer where he was.” That just makes it harder by claiming Jesus refused to hurry back to heal Lazarus *because* he loved his friends.

Have you ever noticed that in the four gospels Jesus is never in a hurry? They never depict him running or hustling. This drives me nuts. I'm constantly hustling and figure the Son of God can certainly keep up with me. But the Savior will not be pushed. That's because you are his friend, and he loves you too much to be a means to an end.

So, Jesus does not hop on the first train back to Bethany. He doesn't hurry. And Lazarus dies.

Can you imagine what was going on in the home of Mary and Martha as they waited for Jesus while their brother quickly slipped away on his death bed? How many times did one of them go out to the road to see if Jesus was coming? How often did they check with their servant to make sure Jesus got the message? They were so certain that the one who healed so many people he didn't even know would surely rush to the bedside of Lazarus whom he loved.

Sure, you can imagine that. You've been right there. For all of us life eventually gets overwhelming, and you could use a little help from the Savior. So you pray for your relationship that is coming unraveled, or for a job or your finances that are in trouble, or for the healing of someone you cherish. “Lord, this one whom you love is ill.” But Jesus doesn't come in time. And in spite of your prayers what you were most afraid of happening, happens.

Jesus is not Superman who always arrives in the nick of time. Jesus is the Savior who often arrives after the nick of time has come and gone. Nothing in the Bible indicate that Jesus wants to help with your rescue plans for life. That's because he has his own plan for you, which is to lead you to a new life.

But you say, "I'm not looking for a new life. I've worked hard for this life, and it's close to being the way I want it to be. All I need is a little help with this crisis." If all you want is a little help, you don't want Jesus. When you ask Jesus to come to you, you're not asking for a boost. Again, whether you realize it or not, you're asking for a new life. So Jesus waits. He delays and lets the time run out. That's because only after the expectations of Jesus as a helper have died will you be ready for the new life Jesus brings.

Lent is a forty-day period in the church year in which we prepare for Easter when this new life will become evident. One of the purposes of the season of Lent is to focus on the calling to follow Jesus Christ even to a cross, and there is no avoiding that cross if we really want to understand Easter. This is why some people give up something for Lent as a symbol of giving ourselves up to God.

Lent is the unattractive cousin of Advent. No one sends out "Happy Ash Wednesday" cards at the beginning of Lent. There are no Lent parties. No presents. And you probably didn't decorate your home for Lent. Clearly, there is no danger of Lent ever being commercialized. When it comes to Lent, our society has said to the church, "You can have it." The question is do we really want Lent, when it calls us to focus on what it really means to love God, and not just on what God can do for us.

Again, Jesus thinks of you as a friend. Friends choose to love even when there is no instrumental benefit to it, even when it costs, and when they don't get what they want from each other. That's true of any friendship. If you are in a relationship for what you can get out of it, that is not love. And this certainly is true of our relationship with God. Lent reminds us that choosing to love God not only because of the blessings, but in spite of their absence, is what makes faith serious business.

After a couple of days, Jesus announced that they would now head back to Bethany. And the disciples reminded him the last time they were in town the people tried to throw stones at them. In essence, they were saying, "Don't go back to where they'll take away our lives." Jesus responded by saying that trying to save life by avoiding loss is like walking in the dark. Sooner or later, you are going to hit something and drop what you are clinging to anyway. But those who see the light of the world are not afraid. And the disciples think this is just another analogy. They were never as enamored with analogies and metaphors as Jesus was. (I imagine the disciples constantly looking at each other after Jesus says things like this and asking each other, "Did you get that?" "No, I never understand what he's talking about.") But Thomas said to the others, "Let us go that we may die with Jesus."

The gospel writers always introduce Thomas as "Thomas the Twin." But we don't know anything about Thomas's twin. It could be anyone. Even you. Don't you relate well to this doubt-riddled, hardened realist? I do. Sometimes I think I could be his identical twin.

Like Thomas we get confused by what Jesus says and by what he does and doesn't do. We don't see how good will come out of our losses, and we don't really understand what it means to have this new life Christ is giving. That's okay. You aren't asked to understand. You are just called to join Thomas and every disciple of Christ to this day in choosing to follow even through the losses of life.

The new life will still come even if you don't see how. That is because Jesus is your friend, even when you are not sure you still want to be his. Amen.