

LORD, COME AND SEE

John 11:25-44; Fifth Sunday in Lent

April 10, 2011 (8:30 a.m.)

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John 11:25-44

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.

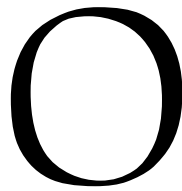
Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came to where Jesus 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 began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could 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 out 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!"

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.



ver time, biblical texts begin to intersect and carry real life stories, I wonder if that's true for you? I hear a biblical phrase and it becomes a trigger for instant recall, a surge of images, a story remembered.

A few years back, Steve, Ted, Kendra Hotz and I were working on planning worship for a conference. We sat at the large mahogany table in the parlor, chewed on words of scripture and thought about how music would shape the service. We tested the words of the Trisagion, the ancient prayer of the church, "Holy God, Holy Strong, Holy Immortal, Have Mercy on Us."

I'd brought our youngest child and she was in the throes of potty training. She would color at the table, wiggle to the floor and play with the table legs, but way too often, she'd whisper messily in my ear, "I gotta go potty, Momma." With the frequency with which she was asking, trusting that my colleagues were like family, I determined she could make the trip by herself.

As we continued to plan worship, crafting liturgy to give glory to "the Resurrection and the Life" I wasn't really paying attention to our youngest, until she burst out of the bathroom, full steam ahead into the parlor with shorts at her ankles,

"Momma! Come and See!"

That's the story that first comes to mind when I read this text – a child bursting into the scene crying, "Come and See." But in today's text it is the crowd who cries to Jesus on behalf of their friends, Martha and Mary. It is the crowd who cries, "Lord, come and see."

"Come and see" are answering words in the gospel of John, simple Greek imperatives. These words are good news words. Evangelistic language that Jesus the Teacher uses to invite his disciples to follow. When Jesus asks them, "What do you seek?" the two disciples respond with another question, "Where are you staying?" Jesus responds, "Come and see." And their life together begins on the heels of these words.¹

Turn those words around. Put the imperatives onto the lips of the people in the community of faith. What does it look like when we, the people of God, invite or make space for Jesus to step into our lives; especially I wonder what it looks like when we make space for Christ to see the 'places of death' in our lives?

In this story – Martha has confessed belief: I believe you are the Messiah; the Son of God; the One coming into the world. Mary has moved away from the home, outside the village – and the people of God have followed her, for consolation – for being intentionally present in compassion. For Martha and Mary, the death of their brother could bring destitution. No man in the family meant no money. This wasn't just grief over physical death, there would be life threatening economic and social consequences for these sisters.

I've been thinking about the places of death in our life together and how that plays out in our life as a particular church, at Idlewild. I wonder where the places are where Jesus comes among us and is disquieted and deeply disturbed; or in the Greek – where Jesus comes among us and groans in the Spirit and is troubled enough to weep with us.

Two stories come to mind - one a story of beauty and intentionality, the other an unfinished narrative and a call to befriend some places of death in our greater community.

"Exposed," was her answer to my first question. "Jesus wept." was the second. The questions were – "How are you feeling right now?" and "What biblical text is guiding you?" Both answers were courageous and honest.

No one likes to feel exposed, to be out there – but for Georgiana – life was losing focus, sight was limited and that which gave her meaning and life was disappearing. And that sense of exposure led her to today's John text.

Henri Nouwen says, "It is indeed in the usual, normal, and ordinary events that we touch the mystery of human life. ... It is precisely in the moments when we are most human, most in touch with what binds us together, that we discover the hidden depths of life. Fear of death often drives us to death, but by befriending death, we can ... choose life freely."²

These conversations with Georgiana tapped into the mystery of human life. When she responded to my question about scripture, we initially laughed together – she with that witty smile, both in her eyes and on her lips, and me initially thinking she'd picked it because it was the shortest text in the bible. Whatever you do, say "Jesus" to the pastor and you get a pass, right? But as we began to read it together, the Spirit began to reveal differently.

Georgiana knew of death's advance. She knew from her 90 plus years of wisdom born out being part of the body of Christ that this biblical text was about life and death. At the end, as I finished reading it to her, I looked up at her and asked, "Did you pick this one because it's about life and death." And her only response was, "Oh, Lord."

Georgiana died Thursday evening this week. A week prior, I was witness to the adult choir, late into the evening, being intentional about being present in consolation. I was witness to the body of Christ at Idlewild saying to Jesus, "Lord, Come and See." After a strenuous rehearsal preparing for today's 11:00 worship cantata, several choir members took the time to come by Georgiana's. They gathered around her bed to sing the hymns of faith. They were like the Jews in today's text who followed Mary, to weep with her.

Georgiana's life was rooted in music - whether singing in the Idlewild choir for decades or traveling as a military bride – it was the music that bound her family together. Gathered around her hospital bed, her youngest son calling out hymn numbers from the old red hymnal, the choir sang out the first and last verses. Another son, Alan, called the other brother, Woody, in Washington State, and said, "You won't believe this. Listen."

As the choir members left the house, one reached out, put his hands on my shoulders and pulled me in. Then he pushed me out, held me with his eyes – there were no words. Another said, “Wow.” One asked, “Did you see her lips moving? I have to believe she was singing along.” I was too busy feeling her grip in my hand, feeling the movement of her fingers and watching tiny tears fall from her eyes that I’d missed the movement of her lips.

Jesus came near that night and saw the people and I’m pretty sure he wept. The hidden depths of life were known, and the places of death had been befriended by the community of Idlewild. I’m grateful for so much - but that night was a glimpse into something holy - and for that I’m more than thankful. It’s like I could step into Christ’s prayer before the people, and hear Jesus praying, “Father I thank you that you hear me – I don’t pray this for myself – because I know you’re with me – but I pray this for these choir members, so that they might believe you sent me.”

At the Ensminger family home that night it was a chorus of voices – the people of God at Idlewild saying to Christ, “Lord, Come and See.” It was Christ saying, “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” It was God saying, “Glory.”

The almost, but not yet story comes out of my experience of balancing the roles of mother, pastor and coach. This year, my third year in, I coached the 3rd and 4th grade basketball team with a teacher friend. This team is one of many, a part of our increasingly growing Recreation Outreach Ministry.

Our team has always had a mixture of community and Idlewild member children playing together. This year the team had one new girl, who came in not knowing a thing about basketball – she shed such huge tears of fear at our first game that she almost didn’t play and she regularly put the ball in the defensive hoop scoring points for the opponent. This young woman was our team’s most improved player by the end of the season, – she was “E”, our strong fearless forward.

As the end of the year pizza party drew to a close the parents and partners sat in booths talking. I was sitting among a group of women and men which I knew included a roller derby playing mother and her Rastafarian boyfriend and a 30 year old widow. The widow openly shared the pain of the anniversary that was approaching in two weeks – the death of her husband in an auto accident. Together we talked about Camp Good Grief and the books they read together as mother and daughter to give voice to the grieving process.

When you work for years with a group of people and their children – you get to know them. Together most of this group had watched our girls grow from toddlers playing herd ball to actually beginning to pick up the basics of basketball. Real gifts were emerging in the girls. It felt like church, like there was something very holy at work at that table, with empty glasses of soda, left over pizza slices left over and ice cream cake crumbs. It felt like Jesus had drawn near and was peering into our lives together.

What happened at the table was that the depth of vulnerability and sharing led to another question at the table, when the widow turned and asked “E’s” mom, “While we’re on hard subjects, - so how

is it raising children as two moms? How do you do it? Do you talk about it? Are there books out there for you to read?"

E's mom looked at the questioner and then to me and then there was an awkward silence. "Don't expose me" seemed to be the plea behind her eyes. I intuited the silence was related to my presence, particularly as a pastor at Idlewild, at the table. I looked at her and said something like, "I'm not here to judge, I'm a mother, too. I'm pretty sure you could teach me a few things. I'd love to hear how you two mothers are raising her." To which she said something like, "Well, you never know. You're a minister at Idlewild."

For her, just having the conversation was a step of reaching out, of courage, of taking a risk. To me, hearing her hesitation, it was a critique.

As a pastor, the critique I heard, was, "I'm not communicating hospitality, but hostility, about what it means to be a gay parent, raising children in Memphis." The place of death for me, is that as a church, I don't think we've befriended the potential harm from the discrimination that can come when living as both gay and Christian.

A member from our extended outreach community, a place of intentional witness in our daily work and ministry of the church, didn't feel safe talking about what it means to be gay and raising a daughter in front of me because I'm a pastor at Idlewild. That's a place of death when you can't talk about raising children openly because you're afraid that the church might take away some privilege. That's a place of death when a mother feels she'll be "exposed" or more so that her daughter would be made to be "exposed" by the church.

I can't know how Jesus felt, but I do wonder if at the end of the pizza party that day, if Jesus drew near and if he was greatly disturbed and troubled. I trust he wept. And I trust that we, as the body of Christ, can work to befriend the places of death, by crying out, "Lord, Come and See." And in the hard places, the places of death, Christ's courage will lead us to believe and to hear Christ say to us about those who feel exposed, or vulnerable, "Unbind them, and let them go."

Holy God, Holy Strong, Holy Immortal, Have Mercy on Us. Come and See.

Amen.

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¹ John 1:39

² Nouwen, Henri, *A Sorrow Shared*, Ave Maria Press, Inc., 2010, p. 5-6, 68.