Sunday, March 24, 1996
JOURNEY TO DEATH AND LIFE
John 11:1-45

Do you remember your first experience with death? Maybe as a young child, you had a pet dog, cat, parakeet, or hamster that died. Perhaps it was your grandmother who died when you were eight years old, or maybe a favorite aunt or uncle passed away when you were a teenager. It could have been a brother, sister, or parent.

We've all been there, or will be someday — where Mary and Martha are in this story from the Gospel of John — when someone we love deeply becomes ill and dies, or dies suddenly in an accident. The grief can be intense, especially if it's a young person who has died.

I have officiated at many funerals, and each one is different. When a person dies at age 96 after having lived a long, vigorous life and is ready to die because she knows her life in this world is over, it's a different kind of journey to death compared to someone who dies young or in the middle of life.

From what we know, Lazarus was a young man when he suddenly became ill and died. Jesus had been notified by Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, that their brother — who was a close friend of Jesus — was seriously ill and near death.

Yet when Jesus received the message, he didn't seem to be in a hurry to visit his friend Lazarus. By the time Jesus did decide to go, it was too late. Lazarus had already died and had been buried for four days.

Whenever I read this story, I'm puzzled. Why did Jesus wait so long before going to Bethany? We can only speculate. Maybe by the time he got the message about Lazarus' illness, Lazarus was already dead. Instant communication systems, like we have today, were not available.

Whatever the reason, we've all had the experience of Mary and Martha. Haven't there been times when you've prayed and prayed for God's help, but there seemed to be a long delay, and then it was too late? I know I've felt like Mary and Martha. I've thought, "If you care so much about me, God, where were you when I needed you? Why did it take you so long?"

Or maybe you've had a loved one die or know someone who has been permanently damaged by an incurable disease, only to hear that three years later, a cure for that illness was discovered. You might have wondered why it took so long.

It could be that one reason the early church remembered this story was that it reminded them that the workings of God don't always fit into our human timetables. It is true that sometimes God's delays seem unreasonably long.

This past week, I've read this story of Jesus and his close friends Lazarus, Mary, and Martha over and over again. Here's what I think happened and why the early church remembered this story.

First of all, I believe Jesus knew that by the time he received the message about Lazarus, Lazarus had already died. So there was no need for Jesus to rush. Instead, he took time to pray, seeking to better discern God's will. Should he make the trip and jeopardize his life on

the way? Strong opposition to his ministry had been growing. Did God have other things for him to do?

As a result of his praying, Jesus concluded that it was God's will that he go to Lazarus. He then spent two more days in prayer for Lazarus, Mary, and Martha.

We are told that when Jesus arrived at the tomb, he didn't pray for Lazarus to be raised from the grave. Instead, he gave thanks that God had already heard him and granted his request. When did God hear him? During those two days of waiting — far from forgetting his friends in Bethany or ignoring their sorrow, Jesus was praying for them.

So when Martha said to Jesus upon his arrival, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," Jesus responded, "Your brother will rise again." Martha misunderstood him, thinking he was speaking about a resurrection far in the future. That's when Jesus spoke the comforting words that resonate with us to this day: "I am the resurrection and the life; those who believe in me, though they die, yet shall they live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."

These words are precious to the church. The image of Jesus weeping with Mary and Martha at Lazarus' tomb has provided comfort and hope unmatched by any other resource.

But there's more to this story and why the early church remembered it. The account of Lazarus' raising is one of several "sign" stories in the gospels. A "sign" story is a miraculous act of Jesus followed by a theological discussion of its meaning.

Other "sign" stories in the Gospel of John include the turning of water into wine, the healing of a crippled man at the pool, the feeding of the crowds, and the giving of sight to a man born blind, which we discussed last week. The story of Lazarus is also a "sign" story.

"Sign" stories have two key features. First, Jesus acts according to his own timing, not according to external pressures. We saw this when Jesus delayed going to Lazarus despite being urged to hurry. Second, a "sign" story is told because it reveals a larger truth about God's glory and presence in the world, made known through the miraculous act.

For these stories to work this way, they operate on two levels. On one level, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. But on another, the act reveals a truth about life eternal, which begins here and now and is available through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Thus, what's really going on is not just a family crisis in Bethany. On a larger scale, it's a message about what God is doing for all of creation. In the same way Jesus gives life to Lazarus, God is giving life to the world. On one level, the story is about Lazarus, but on another, it's about Jesus' coming death and resurrection.

Mary and Martha want their brother back, and in bringing him back (even though he would die again), Jesus reveals that through him, God is giving life to the world. Jesus declares this truth to Martha in the heart of the story: "I am the resurrection and the life."

Now we can better understand what was going on in the mind and spirit of Jesus. We are told he was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled," and later again that he was "deeply moved." We also read that "Jesus wept." The crowd, seeing Jesus weeping, said, "See how he loved him." Jesus was weeping not only for Lazarus but for himself and for the world.

Jesus was experiencing something similar to what he would feel in the Garden of Gethsemane, for he knew that by calling Lazarus out of the tomb, he was, in a sense, stepping into the tomb himself.

The story that follows this one in the Gospel of John underscores this. The belief in Jesus generated by raising Lazarus prompted the religious authorities to plot Jesus' death. In this way, the Lazarus story foreshadows the Jesus story.

This doesn't mean Lazarus, Mary, and Martha were simply props in a spiritual story. They were real people, caught in grief and death, and Jesus brought them comfort and life. Jesus was a real human being, ministering to those who were suffering.

There's one more level to this story. It's not only a "sign" story, but also a teaching story.

When Jesus arrived at Lazarus' tomb, he gave three distinct commands. The first command was to those around him: "Take away the stone." The second command was to Lazarus: "Lazarus, come out." The third command was again to those with him: "Unbind him and let him go."

These commands were remembered because they are also commands for the early church and for us today.

We all live in tombs of one kind or another that need the stone rolled away so we can be free. A man named Gus had a terrible childhood — one he had buried the day he graduated high school and left home for good, never looking back.

After putting himself through college, Gus married a gentle woman who loved him like no one else had. Jeanette was a Christian, and Gus went to church with her because he saw how much it meant to her. During one service, Gus was so moved that he began to cry. From then on, he was like a man on fire — studying the Bible and trying to follow the teachings of Jesus.

But despite serious prayer and effort, Gus had a terrible temper that would flare up without warning. One day in a fit of anger, he hit his four-year-old daughter for not taking a nap. That evening, when he saw the bruises on her little body, he broke down. He had done what he promised he would never do: he had abused his child. His wife realized he was in a deep depression, and together they sought help.

With the support of a therapist and their minister, Gus began to face the painful past he had buried — the years of physical abuse he had suffered as a child, the source of his rage. Little by little, with help, the stone was rolled away, and Gus exposed his old wounds to the healing light of Christ. As a result, he found new life and became a different person. It was a journey from death to life.

There are many stones in our lives that need to be rolled away so that light and fresh air can enter. The same is true on a societal level. We are called, both as individuals and as the church, to remove these stones so that the forces of death in our lives can be opened to God's resurrection light.

Jesus' second command was, "Lazarus, come forth." This story tells us that God is forever calling us out of our tombs. God calls us to be free. Just as others help roll away the stone, we

must also take initiative in our lives. There are many people whose true selves are buried, waiting to be called forth.

So whatever your tomb is, you are being called by Jesus to come out. Maybe you are stuck in an emotional deadlock with someone, where you demand they change first, or you refuse to seek help. Perhaps you are trapped in the relentless drive to always be busy and hurried, using it as an excuse not to respond lovingly and sensitively to others. You could be in the tomb of addiction — whether to alcohol, drugs, money, status, or consumption.

Institutions and church congregations can also be stuck in tombs, as good as dead. Whatever your tomb is, God is calling you to come forth.

Jesus' third command was, "Unbind him and let him go." Just as we need help to roll away the stone, once we come out, we need others to help unbind us. You could be bound by fear — fear of change, fear of the future — or by past memories or resentments. Part of the church's mission is to unbind people and let them go.

Your journey to death can be turned into a journey to life. Amen.