

At the Crossroads ... where despair meets joy

Lesson: **John 11:1-45**

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2011:1-45>

In the mid 1980s, I was working for a large law firm in Los Angeles. The firm was the most profitable firm of the time, specializing in mergers and acquisitions. 24-hour days in the office and on the clock were not unusual. One of my friends there was a young man named John. John was a gentle, sweet man, nice looking, pale, bookish. He was a secretary to one of the associates there. We weren't friends outside of work, really, though we had friends in common, but running into each other in the chaos or the copy room was always an occasion for celebration and gratitude.

One day John confided in me that he was participating in a research project at UCLA. Young gay men were getting their blood drawn and tested for a newly discovered disease that seemed to be targeting gay men. The research project was being conducted over a number of months. John would go in regularly for testing.

Over the next few months, the newly discovered disease started getting little bits of mainstream press. Many of my friends were gay, so I heard stories of this new disease from them as well. It came to be called HIV/AIDS, but at that time it wasn't really called anything, except death. If you got it — and by "it" people meant the later stage symptoms — you died fast. It was like the plague in the middle ages: one day you were sick, and the next day you died horribly. It didn't take me long to realize what John was being tested for, and what it might mean.

At some point, I realized I hadn't run into John in the copy room for a while, and so I started to ask around. Quietly. It wasn't something you talked about very loudly. I discovered that John had died. Friends we had in common spoke of hearing about his memorial. I wept. Even after a couple of years, I still grieved his loss.

Ten years passed. By that time I'd lost a number of friends and acquaintances to death and distance. I'd been through troubles of my own, and my heart had hardened. I had become somewhat inured to loss, and very cynical. One afternoon I was at some large venue — a theater, or an office building, or somewhere, I don't remember. But I do remember this: an elevator opened and out came my friend John. Quite alive. Healthy, even. He turned in my direction, recognized me, and hugged me. And I just started to cry. And cry. And cry. My joy overwhelmed me. He was quite taken aback by my reaction, not knowing he'd been dead. His gentle eyes widened behind his glasses, and I blurted out: I thought you were dead. Still astonished, he smiled and said, "No. But I am a lawyer."

To this day, I remember that moment as having witnessed a miracle. I have never felt as though I'd had faulty information — though my mind insists that must be so. My experience then, and now after years of reflection, is of the miracle of new life. I had witnessed the miracle of new life. Seeing that miracle, and others, called me out of my own tomb.

Over the years, as we suffer despair and loss, it is easy to become calloused, hardened, and oblivious to miracles. We look for burning bushes, or sudden and easy peace, or deathbed recoveries. And even when they happen — even when God speaks directly to us, or angry parties sit down together, or dying people get up and walk — we do not see the miracle. When we cannot see God's hand in the big events, we cannot hope to see the holy in the small, the daily, the routine. And when we harden our hearts to the possibility of new life, we cannot experience it, either. We can prevent God from giving us new life. When we prevent God from giving us new life, it is as though we are inside a tomb, and refuse to come out.

On that day that Jesus called Lazarus out, Lazarus wasn't the only one inside a tomb. Martha and Mary and their friends and kin had given up. For days, they had waited for Jesus to come and heal their brother. Don't you know they had sat by his bedside, praying, or sat at the window, watching for Jesus? We know Martha and Mary knew Jesus could heal — Martha even says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." They knew Jesus could heal. But Jesus didn't come, and Lazarus died.

How many of us have waited by the bedside, praying, or watched at the window, hoping? We have all had those times when God simply didn't show up in time. God didn't stop us from suffering, or others from dying. God didn't reconcile a broken relationship before it was too late.

When Jesus arrives, Martha has lost her brother to death. Lazarus was dead — four days dead. The Jews didn't embalm, so after four days in a tomb, Lazarus was most assuredly dead. Martha knows that Jesus could have healed him, so even then, while Lazarus lays dead and entombed, Martha says to Jesus, "But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

Jesus responds to her, "Your brother will rise again... I am the resurrection and the life". "I AM" — there's that name of God again; Jesus is reminding Martha that he and God are one. And Martha has confessed her belief to him and in him. But when Jesus goes to the tomb and asks the people to roll away the stone, to unbury Lazarus, Martha stops Jesus: "But, Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

Lazarus has been dead. He is going to stink. Her statements are factual. They are true. And they are utterly irrelevant to the witnessing of a miracle. Martha is saying to Jesus, in effect: "even though you are here, and I believe you can get anything from God, there shall be no miracle." In her grief, in her despair, in her love of the rational and the conventional, Martha is clinging to Lazarus' tomb, and she has entombed herself. She isn't ready to come out, to see a miracle, and so Martha tries to stay Jesus' hand. She tries to stay in her own tomb. I have always wondered what would have happened if Lazarus had refused to come out of his tomb — if he had chosen to remain dead.

How many of us choose to remain dead? How many of us live inside our own tombs, clinging to the walls, wearing our comfortable graveclothes? Miracles happen all the time, but we see them only when we are willing. New life is given in this life, but we can claim it and live it only if we are willing to come out of our tombs. Jesus, our Christ, brings new life out of tombs. He will roll away the rock and call you into new life, but you must choose to come out. If you're in a tomb (or a closet, for that matter) you must choose to come out in order to have new life.

Why do we cling to our tombs? Because new life is never simply a better version of the old life. We have all suffered loss and pain, and sometimes it is excruciating to release that pain so that there might be new life.

New life is new: transformed, changed, risky, risktaking, unknown, and scary. When we cling to the old pain and despair, we know what to expect. We are familiar with the discomfort of death. But we don't know what a new life, a real life, will look like for us. We don't know who we will be when we come out. When Lazarus emerges from his tomb, he is not the same man. He is changed, and he spends the rest of his life glorifying God. Martha, Mary, and all those who witnessed it are changed. By witnessing a miracle, they are transformed.

I know some of you have suffered terrible loss, senseless, heartbreaking loss. Others deal with chronic illness, or deep disappointment. Brothers and sisters, hear me: the relief from despair is not happiness. The relief from despair is joy. And they are not the same: joy is not happiness. Joy is the upswelling of awe and gratitude in the face of a miracle.

Let me tell you what joy is: last Sunday at our Fireside Chat, Larry Edson spoke of wanting to give the youth of our church a solid grounding in faith and in building community. He spoke of wanting to help them develop church of their own. I could not stop smiling. Tears came to my eyes. I'm not sure I heard everything Larry said, because my heart and my mind were too busy thanking God and glorifying God for all the work the Holy Spirit is doing in your hearts. That's joy, and when you feel joy, you cannot stop glorifying your God. You can feel joy even in the midst of despair, and joy is what will eventually open your tomb. When the time comes that you feel joy, know you are in the presence of a miracle, and are being called into new life.

At the crossroads of humanity and divinity is miracle. At the place where despair and joy meet is new life. It is new life — not old life, reshaped — but new life, outside the tomb. Every time a man puts down the bottle, he's walking out of the tomb. Every time a woman goes back to school, she's walking out of the tomb. Every time a man hugs his prodigal son, he's walking out of the tomb. Every time someone apologizes — truly, deeply repents — for a wrong, she's walking out of the tomb.

It doesn't matter whether you've been dead for four days or forty days or forty years: when you choose to counter your despair with joy, when you choose to see the miracles, when you choose to reach out to Jesus in faith and say "I want a new life, not just a better old life, but a new life in communion with You and loving community with others", you are taking one step closer to coming out of your tomb.

But you have to let go of your graveclothes. You have to stop clinging to the old pain, and be ready to walk into the light. For God in Jesus our Christ will roll away the rock for you. God will call you forth out of the dark tomb you're living in. God will extend a hand of hope and invite you into a new life, a transformed life, at the crossroads of despair and joy.

Let's pray together: Holy Jesus, we know that we will suffer in this life. We know that we will feel despair. And we know that you have gone ahead of us, and whenever we ask, will turn and lead us through our pain, through our dark difficult days and nights, and into your light of hope. There's someone in here who needs you, Lord. If there's even one heart open to your healing presence, grant that heart receptivity to joy, that a miracle may be worked in that life, and in this church through that life, and in your world through this church. May our lives glorify yours. Amen.