

SERMON 26th MARCH 2023**Dance with my father again**

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Luther Van dross famous song dance with my father again.

If I could get
Another chance
Another walk
Another dance with him
I'd play a song
That would never
Ever end
How I'd love, love, love
To dance with
My father again

Wouldn't it be great if we could all dance with our fathers, our mothers our loved ones again as the song suggests? That would mean bringing the dead back to life. We think "if only" through our love and our grief but we could never imagine that it could ever happen in real life. I enjoy going to sleep because I'm often joined by my parents and my husband in my dreams, they often come to visit me in my dreamtime world. The idea of resurrecting the dead back to life particularly after being dead for four days seems absurd until Lazarus.

Let's see what Spong has to say about this story. John the writer of the gospel tells us with great emphasis that Jesus, when first notified of Lazarus sickness, refused to move until Lazarus was only dead, but actually buried. By the time Jesus did arrive in Bethany, Lazarus had already been in his grave for four days and

both Mary and Martha did not want Jesus to remove the rock of the opening of the burial cave, because in the words of the King James Bible “already he stinketh” (John 11:39). The Revised Standard version is a bit more sensitive, translating the phrase “by this time there will be an odor.”. Spong suggests that every symbol employed by John reveals that Lazarus is not a person, but a sign and a symbol. That’s one way of debunking this miracle story. But let’s look at the family dynamics as portrayed in this gospel narrative.

It could have been any family two sisters and a brother how many here have a similar family make up? When a member of our family becomes unwell it is such a worry for everyone, we want to make things better for them and sometimes we can’t so we support them the best way that we can through prayer through just being with them, holding their hand and giving them strength the best way that we can.

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Mary was the sister who loved to listen to Jesus. Martha was the sister who loved to serve others. Lazarus was the brother who was ill. Well, no family is consistently perfect, are we?

Each of us, from the smallest household, to the largest extended family, has people who like to listen, people who like to serve, and people who are sick. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. They keep showing up in the New Testament, and they keep showing up in church.

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.

Delay. Delay. Delay. The story of our lives. Why doesn't Jesus drop everything he is doing and rush over to see Lazarus?

"Don't you realize how needy I am?" "If you love me, why don't you respond immediately?" Those are the questions we demand of each other, aren't they?

Ah, but it is not the people who respond most urgently and most anxiously who love us most. Often, the people who are willing to drop everything and help us are the ones least equipped to help. The ones who love us most sometimes take longer to arrive than others.

So, it was with Jesus. He heard the news that Lazarus was ill, and he waited two days to respond. It was a long time. It was not because he did not love Lazarus.

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Grief, anger, tears, and the shocks and surprises of family life, full of pain, but also full of joy and new life. "If only you had been here our brother would not have died." When Mary expresses her anger to Jesus he took it all in, he was moved himself, and he wept. But what use are his tears? He purposefully delayed his arrival at Bethany until after Lazarus was in his grave. Why cry now? For Lazarus? For his sisters? Where were you, Jesus? Why save your tears for this day, long after Lazarus has gone to his grave?

I think Jesus tears has to do entirely with his love and compassion for Martha and Mary as well as for his friend Lazarus and even all those who were there that day mourning with the family. Jesus wept also because they were blind to the truth of who he was. He weeps at our suffering because of his love, but his anger is not fruitless or pointless any more than his compassion is fruitless or pointless.

Jesus could prevent Lazarus' death and his sisters' grief, he deliberately stays away from Bethany until after Lazarus death. What better way to show his love for his

friends, to demonstrate his power over death, and to get the attention of a culture on the new things that he as the son of God can do.

It was customary for the community during the time of this story to gather round in collective mourning pretty much what many of us do today. Note that it was the Jews who mourn with Mary. The bodies of the deceased were washed, anointed with oils and spices, then wrapped in strips of cloth and hastily buried before decay could set in. It was believed that the soul lingered near the body for three days. By the fourth day, there was no chance that Lazarus might be “only sleeping.” Lazarus at the moment of his raising was not a glorious, angelic-looking being clothed in radiant light. He was a rotting corpse wrapped in burial cloths. Martha says, “Lord already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.”

The truth is that resurrection is neither cute nor pretty. Jesus still weeps, for each of us – he does not ignore the pain of our illnesses, our hurts, and the terrible things that life sometimes deals out to us. The healing new life of the spirit comes, not when we’re looking our best, but when we are at our worst: when we are lying in hospital beds with tubes in our bodies; when we are sick or bleeding or in pain; when our minds are tormented or depressed.

The other point to remember is that Lazarus didn’t ask to be raised. He was already dead! It wasn’t any action of his that brought him out of the grave, but the faith of his sisters and the utter conviction that Jesus had, that as he called upon God, new life would pour out on Lazarus and bring him back to life. We are not expected to perform miracles on our own behalf. But if we continue to grow both in faith, and in community, both will sustain us in our own weakest and darkest hours.

There are times in our lives when we have to do what we can and let God do the rest. Lazarus' sisters and the mourners gathered with them had done all that they could. What we discover is that Jesus was not really absent as Martha and Mary supposed. He said at the beginning of the story, "This illness does not lead to death, rather it is for God's glory."

The presence of God covers the whole story even when – and perhaps especially when – the sisters are least aware of it. When we gather around the graves of loved ones – that may be a time when we are least aware of God's presence. But our lack of awareness and understanding does not make God any less present.

In the book of Ezekiel we again read of a situation in which resuscitation seems impossible. The prophet journeys by the Spirit of God to what reads like the site of a terrible battle. Bones lay scattered all around. Death reigns. That valley sounds all too familiar. It did to those in Ezekiel's time who grieved the separation of exile. It still does today for those weighed down by the separations and dyings that leave us feeling very dry, like those bones.

In 2014 my late husband Rewi had a cardiac arrest even after I told him not to go and to take a day off. He didn't listen and still went to a vigorous work out with young fit athletes, something he was not. He suffered a cardiac arrest and at the gym his trainer had to perform mouth to mouth resuscitation on him. Thank goodness the CPR worked whilst they awaited the ambulance. Afterwards Rewi said "he could feel the breath of life come into him" he was conscious, he could breath, and he was alive. Thank God. That's the sort of resuscitation that God breathes into our lives to give us new life, new purpose, new direction. It's like a baptism of life breathing hope, faith and direction into our life which was once dead and going nowhere.

When God speaks like in the creation story in Genesis 1, life arises. When the Spirit brings breath (a single word in Hebrew, ruach, means both spirit and breath), hope takes on sinew and flesh and skin.

For God will gift us with the same Spirit who breathed life into dry bones, raising us to new life, new baptism, new hope. In that hope is our life and peace.