

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

March 22, 2026 – FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Homily: “*Waiting for God*”\*

Ezekiel 37:1-14	(The parable of the Valley of Dry Bones)
Psalms 130	(Out of the depths I call to the Lord)
Romans 8:6-11	(We are to set our minds on the Spirit, and not on the flesh)
St. John 11:1-45	(Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead)

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Today, we are almost there. We have been on this Lenten road since Ash Wednesday, for 33 of the 40 days. Now, we're in the home stretch. As the late Tom Petty, singer and songwriter, so wisely put it, “waiting is the hardest part.” Throughout this Lenten season we have been hearing long passages from the Gospel according to St. John. In each of the last three lessons, people were asking Jesus to do something for them. Nicodemus wanted to know how to be born again. The Samaritan woman at the well wanted the Living Water only Jesus can provide. The man born blind wanted to see again. And today, well, Mary and Martha wanted Jesus to heal their sick brother.

But first, since we've spent every Sunday this month in John's gospel, let's look at how distinct it is from the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In many ways, the Gospel of John is not so much a biography of Jesus as it is a lyrical and theological meditation on Jesus Christ and His saving work. There are several hallmarks of the Gospel of John. One is that the writer uses a recurring motif in the way that Jesus speaks about who He is and what He is doing. A repeating motif is that Jesus and God the Father are One, and whoever comes to know Jesus will also know God. In this way, the Gospel of John is constructed much like a Bach fugue. It revisits the same theme over and over, upside down and right-side up, inside and out—but always the same message: God the Father and Jesus are One.

Moreover, John makes clear Jesus' identity in today's lesson, when He is speaking to Martha: “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.” He follows this astounding claim with a question: “Do you believe this?” Do *we*? I hope and pray so.

Another hallmark of John's gospel: it contains no ‘miracles.’ Miraculous things *happen*, of course; but the author does not refer to them as miracles. Instead, he uses the term ‘signs,’ and Jesus' signs are used to great narrative effect. Every time Jesus gives a teaching, He certifies it with a divine sign. These signs take up the first half of the Gospel of John, and today's sign—the raising of Lazarus—is the seventh and final sign. Seven as the number of holiness and of completeness, is a tremendously important number in the Bible. It could be said that the eighth sign in John's gospel is Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Eight then becomes a sacred number for Christians: the eighth day of Creation is that on which we encounter the risen Christ in the Eucharist, and are made new creations in Christ through Baptism. That's why many baptismal fonts are octagonal. But here, today, we have the final and most perfect sign Jesus performs: the raising of Lazarus from the dead. So what can it mean then that we have this story of Jesus being asked to come heal His sick friend, and yet He *delays* getting there? Jesus even tells His disciples that the sickness Lazarus has does not lead to death. Yet it *does*—at least, from our *human* perspective.

Can you imagine the distress of Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha? Here they have been working with, hosting, and likely funding Jesus and His ministry. They have witnessed wonders beyond description. Now their brother Lazarus, who is a dear friend of Jesus, is ill. Let us remember that in first-century Palestine, serious illness was of great concern. There were no antibiotics or other medications such as we now have. Most illnesses, more often than not, preceded death. Lazarus was seriously ill and his sisters believed Jesus could heal him. Can you imagine the magnitude of their disappointment when Jesus *doesn't* come to their aid?

Lazarus dies, and for this family and community, it is heartbreaking. We need to remember that Mary, Martha, and their neighbors are living in a pre-Resurrection world. For them death was final, the absolute end of all things. When Jesus finally arrives, the sisters and the entire village of Bethany are in full mourning.

Martha greets Jesus not with words of welcome but with an accusation: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Was she so angry and bereaved that she was ready to stop following Jesus? Was she in that empty space in her spirit where grief causes us to lose our minds temporarily? We still grieve even when we walk with Jesus. But the question remains: Why did Jesus not act? Where was He when Lazarus was dying?

At this point, we encounter the shortest verse in the Bible: “Jesus wept”—that’s the King James Version. It’s an important point. Weeping at the graveside flows from profound empathy and sorrow. Twice in this passage we are told that Jesus was deeply moved or disturbed in His spirit. Jesus is not some all-seeing, distant, stoic God. Our God is a feeling, empathizing God. Jesus acts out of this “co-feeling,” which in Greek is the literal translation of “empathy”—sharing the emotions of the other person in order to understand and comfort them.

All of this is very touching and helps us know that it’s okay to weep and grieve when we have lost a loved-one, but we can’t overlook what else is happening. Mary and Martha *begged* Jesus to heal their brother, and they were let down. When Lazarus does in fact die, they mourn and appear to even be angry with Jesus for not acting.

And it is there, in the midst of that hard, desolate place of loss and grief that Jesus speaks *life* with the same force as God spoke at Creation: “*Lazarus, come out!*” And as he does, we see that God’s plan for those He love is that death will *not* have the last word.

I think every one of us has experienced moments of wondering where God was in a time of trial or loss. “Why did God let her die?” “Where was God when I needed Him?” All of us have, at some point, questioned God’s apparent departure. But today’s gospel reminds us: in that space of doubt, anger, and despair, *Jesus shows up*, even when death and loss seem to have slammed the lid on hope. As close as we are to our own emotions—especially in the midst of great (or even small) losses—we lack the proper perspective to see God in our midst. Although we may not recognize God’s empathic and healing presence with us, we can nevertheless trust that He is *always* present with us because He loves and cares for us beyond our ability to imagine.

Another hallmark of the Gospel of John is that he does not use the more common terms “Kingdom of God” or “Kingdom of Heaven” that are used frequently in the other gospels. And that’s because John is saying something different: The Kingdom of God is not so much *established by* Jesus, the Kingdom of God *is* Jesus. And that is likely why Jesus says, “the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). Jesus—the Kingdom of God—is within all who believe in and follow Him. Another reason that if we are waiting, and waiting, and waiting, we are not to give up. God is with us!

Back to the idea of waiting, the waiting for Jesus that is part of today’s lesson about the siblings from Bethany. One thing I’d like to mention is the significance of when Martha says to Jesus “he has been dead for four days.” At that time, Jews believed that a person’s soul hung around for three days after their death—and they could potentially return to life. Perhaps that explains Jesus’ resurrection. In any case, by the *fourth* day, the person was considered *really dead*.

So for the sisters, all hope is lost—Lazarus has died and been placed in his burial cave. Still, they wait. For what, they don’t know. And it is in the midst of this agonizing waiting that God appears. God acts, and brings life, healing, and wholeness. We, too, may experience waiting that is past the point of hope when finally God makes His move.

St. John reminds us that we need to be patient with God (we can’t even imagine how patient God is with *us!*). In any case, as we heard last week, God’s understanding of *everything*—particularly the timing of things—is very different from ours. After all, look at how Jesus purposefully delayed getting to Bethany. He even told the disciples that Lazarus’ illness was “for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” Wow, did it *ever!* A man dead for four days walks out of a tomb?! This Gospel story reminds us that even when everything seems lost and hope is beyond gone, hold on for awhile longer to allow God to act in His way, and in His own good time.

Now, as we near the end of Lent, is as good a time as any to be reminded that God moves in God’s time. And perhaps, since we all lack it, God will grant us the grace to be patient with Him, and allow Him to surprise us with life and resurrection. *Amen*.