

The Witness of Tears

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John 11:1-45

Showing up matters. Just ask the coach of any athletic team. Just ask any kid who needs an adult to guide and to cheer her on. Showing up matters. Just ask anyone who's marking a significant milestone. When my parents celebrated their 50th anniversary, they threw a big open house for family and friends. And eight years later, they still get tears in their eyes when they talk about who came just to be there for them. Showing up matters. When someone simply shows up to be with you at the critical junctures in your life, it matters. A lot.

God knows this. We call it the incarnation – God showing up in the middle of humanity in the person of Jesus. It's right there at the beginning of John's Gospel. "The Word was made flesh, and lived among us..."

Showing up matters. And no more so than when there is a genuine crisis. And what crisis is more real, more urgent than being at death's door. Somewhere or another, all of us have or will get the phone call – you need to come, now. And when someone else in our circle of supporters shows up just to be there with us as we navigate those strange waters of life and death, it matters.

Jesus got the call when his beloved friend Lazarus turned gravely ill. And if ever Jesus' humanity hits me squarely upside the head, it is in this story. Why? For one, because Jesus has a choice to make; what is more human than having to make difficult choices? To go or not to go. To do what friends do, to drop everything and go to Bethany as Mary and Martha asked, for they believed with all their hearts he could save their brother's life. Or not to go, for if he did, he would risk his own death, because he'd already enraged others with his blasphemous claims. Others wanted to kill him.

So faced with the choice to go or not to go, he did the next very human thing – he procrastinated. Can you believe it? Jesus procrastinated. Faced with the ultimate crisis, he took his sweet time. It's true that sickness and death are everyday occurrences, but only until it happens to someone you love. Then it's not everyday; it's a real crisis, and crisis demands an immediate response. There was still time for healing, for Mary and Martha called him while Lazarus still had breath in his lungs and blood pulsing through his veins.

Yet Jesus waited two whole days before risking his own life and departing for Bethany. He said this illness wouldn't lead to death; it would glorify God. But we heard the story -before he got there, Lazarus died. Healing might bring glory to God, but death sure doesn't. As women in antiquity, Mary and Martha needed a male – in this case their brother - to guarantee their economic security; with his death Lazarus left them when they needed him most. Jesus could have done something about it, if only he'd shown up on their time, instead of his own time. Can't say as I'd blame Mary or Martha for their frustration with their friend.

Yes, that feels really human to me, these disparate perceptions of the crises that we face, of the ways we can respond – to go or not to go or when to go – now or later. And what course of action to take – this one or that one or none at all. Heal now, or heal later. Show up or not.

But when in doubt, remember... showing up in person matters. Jesus knew that – from the beginning when the Word was with God and the Word was God. He knew that as the Word was made flesh and lived among us. He knew it when he decided to risk nearing Jerusalem and all those who would seek to kill him. And he surely knew it in those moments he saw Mary and Martha and all the mourners with salty tears streaming down their faces and anguished cries bursting forth from their lungs. It's then we see Jesus' humanity rolling in with the force of a tidal wave as he, too, faces the awful reality of his beloved Lazarus' death and the desperate disillusionment of his sisters. We see his humanity when he weeps tears of anger and frustration as death's power loomed large.

I have heard and read this story many times. And this time, the empathy in that response is just where I want to linger for a while. Jesus is troubled, he's agitated, he's deeply moved, and he weeps right along with his friends. That's what you do when you show up to be present – weep with those who weep; mourn with those who mourn. It makes a difference; it's comforting; oddly enough, it's even life-giving. Scholars say we shouldn't try to psychologize these emotions when this time and place is 2000 years and 10,000 miles removed from our present day culture. That may be. And yet, surely this moment is poignant and heartfelt. This Jesus is not detached and other-worldly (as some would mischaracterize the Gospel of John). The humanity of John's Jesus is on full display. The Word was made flesh and lived among us.

We heard the rest of the story. Some of the crowd around him scorned his inability to stop the power of death. And even more disturbed, Jesus marched toward the tomb, ordered the stone taken away, and said, "Lazarus, come out." And he did. Alive.

End of story? Hardly. In John's narrative, Jesus has just sealed his own fate; by raising Lazarus he's performed the final act that will send him towards his own death and life-giving resurrection.

Everything Jesus has said and done thus far witnesses to who he is –

the resurrection and the life.

Writes Fred Craddock, “John wants us to understand that God’s blessing did not come solely to certain people who happened to be in that place at that time. There was not simply one spot called Camelot where cripples were healed, the blind could see and the dead were raised. It is not the case that subsequent generations in other times and places would have to be satisfied with the thin diet of reading and recalling the wonderful days when Jesus was here and said, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

In other words, this life is for us, now, whether we understand it or not. It’s for all the places we experience death, grief, and loss.

This life is for the city of Rochester which I think is fair to say is in genuine crisis – its schools neighborhoods, homes, streets, and economy - whether from deadly violence or poverty or injustice or lack of opportunity and mobility. The city is in crisis and Jesus’ life is for this, too. This life is for the county of Monroe and the state of New York and every state and country and person to every corner of the world – wherever death in its many guises takes form.

And as Jesus invited the crowd to unbind Lazarus from his burial cloths, and let him go, Jesus invites us to participate in his life-giving work. And in doing so, he affirms the humanity he shares with us. “Strip off the burial cloths of death. Strip off the burial cloths of sin. Strip off the burial cloths of brokenness and division. Strip off the burial cloths of despair. Unbind my people, and let them go. Unbind this community, and let her go.”

Has Jesus shown up for you in this way? What was that like? What did it mean to you? And who needs you to be Jesus for them? The other day I heard the story of a young girl who participates in our Corner Place outreach program. She was in deep despair, and after some prodding, she revealed that her brother had gone to prison, and would be there for a very long time. And she couldn’t talk about it with her family, because they were so upset, too. And as the teacher told how she sat with that girl, and responded in empathy, and gave her permission to spill out her tears and to express her anguish with art materials, I think Jesus was right there, weeping with her. And I hope the bindings of despair began to unravel just a bit.

Do not be deceived; showing up is risky. Incarnation is risky. God showing up among humanity is risky. And the risk doesn’t go away. Holy Week is coming. Death looms large. Another tomb awaits. And yet, hallelujah, hallelujah, resurrection looms even larger. Easter is coming. Amen.