

**March 22, 2026**  
**St. John's Tappahannock**  
**Raising of Lazarus**  
**John 11:1-45**

Mary, Martha and Lazarus were Jesus' friends with whom he stayed between teaching and healing through Galilee. Mary is often depicted as praying fervently with him, and Martha is often working hard making sure everyone was fed and had a place to rest.

The story of Mary and Martha, found in Luke 10:38-42, features two sisters hosting Jesus. Martha, distracted by serving, asks Jesus to make Mary help her. Jesus replies that Martha is worried about too many things, while Mary chose the better part by listening to him, highlighting the importance of presence over busy work.

As a lifelong practicing Christian interested in Biblical Storytelling, I can tell you that this story, until recently did not rest well with the women at church who get things done! So we have found I think a better interpretation. Sure, we all know prayer is an important thing, no doubt! But one definition of Children of the Way, a term for the followers of Jesus from the non-canonical gospel of Thomas, is "those who practice action and repose". Meaning, prayer and action. Both are important.

So we all have aspects of Mary's and Martha's personalities, and we therefore need to balance prayer and action, not overly emphasize one over the other. Certainly that balance shifts over a life time, but we are all called to prayer *and* action, not one or the other. Albeit, this was something that Martha probably needed to hear at the time, but maybe also Mary needed to help with the dishes once in a while too! So let's get to this important story for today about their brother Lazarus.

The raising of Lazarus is unique among the resurrections Jesus performed in the gospels because rather than leaving immediately at the request of Lazarus' sisters, to visit Lazarus because he was very ill, Jesus had allowed four days to pass by. This was so that in Lazarus the sign of resurrection would be shown in all its fullness.

While Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record Jesus raising Jairus's daughter and the widow's son at Nain, John's narrative focuses on Lazarus as the primary resurrection miracle before Jesus's own resurrection. They were not dead as long as Lazarus was before being raised, a necessary point to make for verifying the miracle.

So when Jesus is told by Mary that Lazarus, the one whom he loved, had died, we read "Jesus wept" which is probably the most famous two word sentence in the Bible. Jesus expressed his grief openly at the loss of his dear friend, a normal human emotion in such a situation, which captures our imagination in its simplicity yet vivid implications... *This is truly the Son of Man and the Son of God*. Knowing this is how Jesus reacted, we can trust in his deep concern and compassion for each of us as well. That is why Jesus came as a pauper, not a worldly king, because all people in all situations can know that he understands our struggles, and will be with us through them. Interestingly Lazarus' name means, "God is my help", which helps us remember to say these words, in deep gratitude that we will never be alone.

When Jesus received word about Lazarus, he tells his fellow travelers that this situation will reveal God's glory so that they may believe. So Jesus decides to be with Mary and Martha and Lazarus because of his love for all of them, as well as his knowledge of the purpose God has for us in this event.

Jesus very practical disciples point out, that his opponents in Judea have just tried to stone him — *and now we're turning around and going back there again?!*" Evenso, Thomas responds, "Let us all go, that we may die with him." This shows that he perceives they are going into a dangerous situation, yet that he has much trust in Jesus' motives.

In the Ezekiel reading, it's "the spirit [Hebrew *ruah*, 'breath, spirit'] of the LORD" who gives life, and in a sense *is* life: "I will cause breath [*ruah*] to enter you, and you shall live" (Ezekiel 37:1,5). Likewise, for John, Jesus not only *causes* Lazarus' resurrection, he somehow *is* resurrection: "I am the resurrection and the life," he says to Martha (John 11:25).

The first line of the anthem beginning the Burial of the Dead: Rite II, is “I am Resurrection and I am Life.” Not a simile but a metaphor – no articles like “the,” and is the most important I am statement - the most powerful way to say it. “This is who I am”, Jesus is saying, “Resurrection! Life! - which is essential as we contemplate life’s deepest questions when a loved one has just died, or as we ourselves are about to enter the gateway to the next life, or if we need to ‘come back to the land of the living’ and our true selves after a difficult period. Yes, life’s journey is full of many resurrections.

Back to the gospel, though Martha then calls Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world, she really does not yet understand what “I am the resurrection and the life,” means. When Jesus commands the stone to be rolled away from the tomb, Martha’s still skeptical. Jesus turns to her and says, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

Michael Myers Boulton writes, “The key to the passage, and in a sense to John’s Gospel as a whole, is contained in this question. Jesus isn’t saying, *If you believe, the glory of God will shine*. After all, despite Martha’s skepticism, Jesus raises Lazarus; God’s splendor shines forth in any case! The issue is whether or not Martha will truly see it. She’ll see her brother raised from the dead, that’s for sure — but will she see it for what it truly is, “the glory of God,” a signpost pointing to Jesus’ identity and mission?”

“If she believes in Jesus as “the resurrection and the life,” and so interprets her brother’s rising as a glimpse of that larger reality, she will see God’s glory. She will catch sight of Jesus’ identity and mission. She will understand her brother’s rising as an icon, a window into something even bigger, a foreshadowing of the cross.” 1

John Dominic Crossan, a prominent historical Jesus scholar, often utilizes the Valley of Dry Bones vision from Ezekiel 37 to frame his understanding of resurrection, restoration, and the historical context of early Christianity. Rather than viewing it merely as a prediction of individual bodies rising from the dead, Crossan interprets this imagery within its historical context as a

profound symbol of hope for a broken people (exiled Israel) and, later, for the followers of Jesus.

Key aspects of Crossan's perspective on the Dry Bones story include:

**Resurrection as Political/National Restoration:** In Ezekiel 37, the dry bones represent the people of Israel who feel their hope is gone, and God brings them back to life to return them to their land. Crossan interprets this as a vision of restoration rather than purely a metaphysical resurrection.

**"Flesh and Bones" Allusion (Luke 24:39):** Crossan highlights that when Jesus invites disciples to touch his "flesh and bones" in Luke 24:39, it is an allusion to the dry bones coming back to life in Ezekiel.

**Continuity Over Instant Transformation:** Crossan argues that this "flesh and bones" imagery in Luke signals continuity between life before and after death, rather than a completely otherworldly transformation, grounding the resurrection in a tangible, earthly hope.

**Hope Amidst Despair:** The imagery of dry bones is used to represent the lowest point of human existence—nameless, abandoned, or unburied bodies throughout history, and the hope that God brings life to these discarded situations. **2**

The dry bones story brings to mind the Harrowing of Hell, the medieval term for the dramatic, triumphant descent of Christ into the underworld between his Crucifixion and Resurrection to the souls there. Occurring on Holy Saturday, it signifies Christ's victory over death and the evil one, marking a "rescue mission" where he breaks down hell's gates to bring salvation to those who died before his time. **3**

In summary, for Crossan, the Dry Bones story is a powerful metaphor for restorative justice and hope, used to show how early Christians understood Jesus' resurrection as Life overcoming death as well as the beginning of the restoration of Israel. **2** This is another example of what we talked about two weeks ago – it's a "both and situation", as when we compared John 3:16 and John 3:17.

St. Augustine also chimes in with a useful metaphor. He proposes the "Agreement Promise", which sounds like a conversation with fellow scholars in the 400's AD where he lived in Hippo, North Africa.

He writes, "If someone says, "What is the use of the church if you can confess and be brought back to life by the voice of the Lord and come out immediately of the tomb? What use is the church to you, as you confess the church to which the Lord said, 'What you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven?' Look at Lazarus's case - he came out of the tomb all [wrapped in bandages]. He was already alive by confessing but he was not yet walking around freely, being still entangled [in the linen shroud]. So what does the church do, told as it has, whatever you loose shall be loosed? The church does what the Lord went on at once to tell the disciples of course, "Unbind him and let him go." 4

So what is Augustine saying? First "What you bind on earth you will loose in heaven", from Mathew 16:19, is a phrase Jesus uses when he grants authority to his disciples to make decisions about those they are witnessing to that align with God's will. "Binding or loosing" means "prohibiting or allowing". It is a promise from Jesus that whatever disciples ask in His name, will be done. This reinforces that he will not abandon them when he ascends, for the Holy Spirit will take his place and guide them in all things.

Augustine is saying that Lazarus being unbound from his shroud by Jesus is a metaphor for the role of Mother Church in the world – the church can also unbind us from superficial entanglements based on petty concerns, to be freed up to be empowered servants in the world. At our best we are people seeking to more present to others' needs, without being tied to personal judgments and jealousies which always result in a glorious waste of time for all concerned. At our best we can be workers of the kingdom for God's glorification, which happens when we strive for harmony in the beloved community.

When things get difficult, we often look for God's intervention. But God is waiting for our participation. Let's be resurrected from our fears and rise up to become the people Jesus trained his disciples and all future followers to

be...God's eyes, ears, hands and feet in the world, doing our best to love one another as He loves us.

Jesus wept. Our tears comfort others. Our sadness strengthens hope. Our grief creates goodness. Our weeping wipes fear away. When we cry together, we unbind what has been entombed by fear. Grief means you love and perfect love casts out all fear.

Amen.

## **Resources**

1. Boulton, Matthew Myers; Salt project.org; 3/17/26; sermon commentary
2. Crossan, John Dominic; How to read the Bible and Still be a Christian; referenced in Christian Century Magazine; July 6, 2017
3. <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/harrowing-of-hell/>
4. Elowsky, Joel C.: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: NT IVB John 11-21; IntersVarsity Press; Downers Grove, Illinois; p. 31