

Waking The Walking Dead

[Text - John 11:1-44]

Pastor Dave Shackle
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The 11th Chapter of *John* provides a detailed story of how Jesus deals with the death of a dearly loved friend. In this account, Jesus speaks in lofty theological language about Light and Life, Death and Resurrection. And while this is typical of the way *John* is written, the author - by playing-up Jesus' *Divinity* - ends up making Jesus' *humanity* seem a bit contrived and calculating. So this morning, I'd like us to look at this narrative from a more down-to-earth perspective. By doing so, I think we will appreciate how the depth of a person's *humanity*, may be the best indicator of that person's innate *Divinity* - not just in Jesus' case, but also in our own.

When Jesus learns that his friend Lazarus is ill, he doesn't immediately go to him. The writer of *John* creates the impression that Jesus delays so that Lazarus can *die*, and Jesus can then dazzle the crowd with a stunning, miraculous sign. Personally, I can't imagine Jesus - or anyone - doing that. To me, Jesus' greatness doesn't lie in his ability to foresee the future, or to manipulate the lives and emotions of others. What really makes Jesus remarkable [and credible], is his willingness to consistently do the right thing, especially in the face of uncertainty and personal danger.

Lazarus is sick, and may be dying; however the town of Bethany is only two miles from Jerusalem, where the religious authorities have just threatened Jesus' life. So *maybe* Jesus lays low for a few days, to see what happens. I think that would be a very natural and wise precaution, as apparently do Jesus' disciples. When Jesus finally says, "Let's go back into Judea," his disciples immediately protest: 'Now wait a minute, Jesus, they just tried to stone you to death there! Are you sure you want to go back?' Jesus responds, "Yes, I do!" He determines that he will not hide in the shadow of fear, but will walk in the *Light* of Love. There may be good reason to avoid going to Lazarus; but there's a far better reason to go: "For Jesus loved Martha

and Mary and Lazarus!” And that *love* moves Jesus beyond any personal misgivings or potential fears.

When he arrives, he finds that his dear friend Lazarus is already dead. Hearing that Jesus has come, Mary stays in the house, perhaps too upset to see him because of his delay. Martha, on the other hand, goes right-up to him, and clearly expresses her true feelings: “Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!” Martha deeply loves her brother; and she also deeply loves Jesus; therefore, she’s doesn’t hold-back her feelings. And Jesus, who loves them both, is perfectly willing to accept her expression of grief and anger - which is a good lesson for us all. Genuine *love* can both express - and receive - genuine *feelings*. And as Jesus reveals, *God is Love*! And like a compassionate parent, God welcomes us all to be open and honest about what we’re feeling and thinking. Therefore, the idea that “people of faith” must suppress their feelings or fears, questions or doubts, makes no sense. And the notion that God is some kind of thin-skinned, judgmental Being that we better not disappoint or anger, is equally senseless.

Martha freely expresses her anger and disappointment to Jesus; yet she also tells him that she trusts that the relationship he has with the Divine Source of Life can still make a difference. She says, “Even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask.” Jesus replies, “Your brother will rise again.” She says, “I know that he will rise again, in the resurrection on the last day.” Then Jesus declares, “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!”

That’s a tremendously potent and significant statement; but remember, it is written by John some seventy years later. And while I believe this is a true statement about Jesus, I also believe that this kind of lofty theological language isn’t the way in which he would respond to his grieving friend at her brother’s grave-side. It’s far more conceivable that Jesus’ initial response to the death of his friend is captured in the emotional scene that’s described when Mary joins them at the tomb: “When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and those who

came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed and deeply moved...and Jesus *wept*."

Jesus *did* love Martha and Mary and Lazarus. He loved them with the same kind of passionate love that he felt from his own Heavenly Parent - an all-embracing love that will not let go; a love that is stronger than death itself. Now I realize, that in our scientific and analytical thinking, we may conclude that *death* is the ultimate endpoint. However, when we consider all of the great myths and philosophies about immortality, and consider all the modern theories that string-together limitless and mystifying Universes, we realize that there's more to Life than our meager minds can even imagine or comprehend. So maybe, as Jesus stands at the grave-side of his dear friend, he comes to *realize* - and to make *real* the Divine Mystery - that death doesn't have the final say. If [as Jesus consistently reveals] Perfect Love can reach beyond any barrier - beyond all ignorance and prejudice, all doubts and fears - then why can't Perfect Love also extend beyond the ultimate fear and barrier of death itself?

Now I realize this is pretty cerebral stuff for a "down-to-earth perspective!" So let's consider what this means in practical terms. It means that, like Jesus, you and I can look-up, give thanks to God, and expect *amazing things to happen*. It also means that the same Spirit that inspires Jesus, can inspire you and me to **do** amazing things: To feed the hungry [this very afternoon], welcome the outsider, free the oppressed, bring healing to the sick, and comfort those who mourn. And in a certain way, you and I can even wake the walking dead! We can reach-out to those around us who are so numbed by Life's pains, struggles and disappointments, that they stumble-about in a zombie-like state; and we can help bring them back to the land of the living.

Jesus Christ calls Lazarus out of a dark and lifeless tomb, back into the light of day, where he is unbound and set free! You and I, as the Body of Christ, can also bring others back into the Light. We can awaken within them the Love of our Divine Compassionate Source. We can unbind them and set them free from the oppressive powers of fear and ignorance, hopelessness and despair. We can raise them-up

with the Good News of Divine welcome and grace. We can help one another as we go through Life's most trying times of pain and heartbreak, death and loss. So, while we can't predict or control what happens beyond the grave, in *this* life you and I can make a tremendous difference - by embodying and sharing the Light and Love of the Holy One. According to Jesus, *doing this* is the perfect preparation for whatever lies ahead.