

March 22, 2026
John 11:1-45

Lent 5
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Blest Be the Ties That Bind”

“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.”

I never appreciated the importance of visitations at funerals until I was the one walking the mourner’s path. I have attended numerous visitations and funerals over the years, both as a pastor and as a family member or close friend; but my appreciation of these occasions changed when my father died suddenly on November 12, 1999. Suddenly, I found myself sitting with my mother in the funeral director’s office, making plans for the funeral service at my home church, selecting a casket, choosing funeral cards, discussing details for the obituary, and then going to my pastor’s office to plan the funeral service. I must admit I was numb throughout this entire process; I had presided at numerous funeral services, but nothing had prepared me for when I would be the son of the deceased. When the day of the visitations came, we arrived at the funeral home early to view my father’s body and the many floral arrangements and cards that had been delivered to the funeral home. As the hour of the first visitation approached, we took our places in the funeral parlour; and what happened next will remain in my memory forever. From the moment the doors opened, there was a steady stream of people who came to pay their respects to my father and to offer us their sympathies and support. Many of these people I knew well: family members, old friends, people from my home congregation, long-time neighbours, and even high school classmates. There were also many people I did not know but who knew and loved my father and mother; these were friends they had made in the community, especially in the seniors’ club of which they were active members. During this visitation, the funeral director whispered in my ear that there was a long line outside of the funeral home of people waiting to get in to be with us in our time of grief; at the end of visitation, we discovered that over 300 people came to Scarpa’s Funeral Home to support us as we were mourning the death of a man who was important not only to me but to so many other people. Their presence gave me strength and comfort during one of the most difficult times in my life.

A few weeks after my father’s service, I was preparing a sermon when I came across a book on my shelf by Corinne Chilstrom, a Lutheran pastor and the spouse of Bishop Herbert Chilstrom, in which she describes the devastating experience of

losing their son at an early age. As I leafed through *Andrew, You Died Too Soon*, one of her paragraphs captured perfectly my emotions at that exact moment:

- “Later, when we were once again able to function, they gave us a list of people to thank. They had carried the load for us, gotten others to help when we weren’t able to help ourselves. Although the burden of sorrow was heavy, we didn’t have to bear it alone. We began to understand more than ever before what Paul meant when he wrote, ‘Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ’ (Galatians 6:2).”

Bearing one another’s burdens is at the heart of what it means to be gathered into a Christian community that is united in our faith in Jesus Christ and the love we share with each other in obedience to the command of our Lord and Saviour to “*love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*” (John 13:34-35). It is this love for one another and the call to bear one another’s burdens that is evidenced in today’s Gospel lesson as the family and friends of Mary and Martha gather to support the sisters who are mourning the death of their brother Lazarus. As observant Jews, the community is engaging in the practice of sitting *shiva*, a seven-day period of mourning following the death and burial of a beloved member of the community. Sitting *shiva* shares many of the aspects of our visitations, the main differences being that it takes place after a person’s death and burial within 24 hours and that it is located in the family home; but in both instances it is the gathering of loved ones who come to support and bear the burdens of those who are grieving. This gathering takes place in Bethany, a Judean town near Jerusalem where Jesus stayed immediately prior to and during his passion week in Jerusalem (“*He left them, and went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.*” – Matthew 21:17). Luke recounts a previous visit by Jesus to the home of Mary and Martha where he instructs Martha on the importance of following her sister’s example of sitting at the feet of the one who is the Word of God in their midst (“*Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.*” – Luke 10:41-42). As John introduces the story, he notes that Mary will be the person who will anoint Jesus’ body in preparation for his death (“*Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair.*” – John 12:3). The Evangelist also reports that their brother Lazarus is ill but makes not mention of the nature of this illness. The sisters send a message to Jesus that “*Lord, the one you love is ill*” (11:3), implying that they desire Jesus to come at once so that he might heal their brother of his illness. But when Jesus receives their message, his response is surprising: “*This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified*

through it.” (11:4). So instead of leaving immediately for Bethany, “*though 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*” (11:5-6). Jesus’ delay should not be interpreted as an act of callousness or not caring about the plight of the sisters and their brother; rather it is in keeping with the way he responds to the requests of others previously in the Fourth Gospel, as at Cana when he informs his mother that “*my hour has not yet come*” (2:4); John will emphasize throughout his Gospel that “*the work of Jesus has its own hour*” (Rudolf Bultmann).

After this mysterious delay, Jesus finally tells his disciples that it is time to go to Judea again, which at first frightens them because on a previous visit his opponents “*were trying to stone you, and are you going there again?*” (11:8). But by choosing the time of his return to Judea, Jesus also chooses the time of his death, recalling his previous declaration that “*I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord*” (10:17-18). Jesus reminds his disciples that as the hours of daylight are limited, so too are the hours of Jesus’ work (“*We must do the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work*” – 9:4). Jesus must be about his work while it is still day and will not be hindered by any dangers Judea holds. As the time for Jesus to work is limited, so also the time for them to move from darkness to the light of Jesus is limited, to come to the one who is the “*light of the world.*” (8:12).

Jesus then announces the purpose of his returning to Judea: “*Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him*” (11:11). “*Fallen asleep*” is frequently used in the New Testament as a euphemism for death (“*For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep*” – 1 Thessalonians 4:14). The disciples at first do not understand what this implies and wonder why Jesus would risk his life by returning to Judea if Lazarus had only fallen asleep, believing that “*he will be all right*” (11:12); so Jesus resolved their misunderstanding by telling his disciples plainly that “*Lazarus is dead*” and that the reason why Jesus delayed his journey was “*so that you may believe*” (11:14-15). Thomas, the disciple who will play a prominent role later in the Gospel, epitomizes the obedient disciple when he urges his colleagues to go with Jesus; but his obedience has an ironic edge to it, because he cannot yet understand what the Judean trip will entail for Jesus and his disciples; to him, it is a suicide mission, and when they follow Jesus to Judea the result will be that “*we may die with him.*” (11:16).

When Jesus finally arrives at Bethany, he discovers that Lazarus had already been dead and buried for four days. The four-day period underscores the finality of

Lazarus' death; according to popular Jewish belief at the time, the soul hovered over the body in the grave for three days after death, hoping to re-enter the body. But after the third day, when the soul *"sees that the colour of its face has changed"* the soul leaves the body for good. Here we are introduced to the practice of sitting *shiva* as many people *"had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother"* (11:19). When Martha hears that Jesus is approaching their village, she leaves Mary with the fellow mourners and goes out to meet him; her first words indicate her frustration at his delay and her expectation that Jesus would do something for her brother: *"Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him"* (11:21-22). The edge of Martha's complaint gives greater impact to her statement of confidence in Jesus; *"even now,"* in the face of Lazarus' death, Martha's confidence is undiminished. Her statement that *"I know"* frames her words as a confession that God has given all things into Jesus' hands; *"this remarkable statement combines grief for her brother's death and faith in Jesus' relationship to God."* (Laura Holmes). Jesus responds by stating to Martha that *"your brother will rise again"* (11:23), which Martha at first interprets as a reference to the future resurrection of the dead grounded in tradition expectations of what will happen at the end of days (*"Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt"* – Daniel 12:2). Jesus uses this as an opportunity for one of his *"I am"* statements in which he reveals the fullness of his life and mission as the *"Word that became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth"* (1:14): *"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."* (11:25-26). The promise of resurrection and life is not lodged in some distant event but is available already in the person of Jesus; *"by announcing that he is both the resurrection and the life, Jesus affirms his sovereignty over the present and the future lives of believers"* (Gail O'Day). For Jesus to be the *"resurrection"* means that physical death has no power over believers; their future is determined by their faith in Jesus, not by their death (*"This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day"* (6:40). For Jesus to be the *"life"* means that the believer's present is also determined by Jesus' power for life, experienced as the gift of eternal life (*"I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand"* – 10:28). His question to Martha is also a critical question for all who hear his words: *"Do you believe this?"* for *"unless one believes in Jesus and his word, the transformed life he offers is rendered void"* (O'Day).

Martha's response is couched in the formal language of confession: *"Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world"*

(11:27). Martha's response is remarkable since nowhere else in the Gospel does someone respond to Jesus' proclamation with a statement of belief. She confesses that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Son of God, and "the one coming into the world," anticipating the words of the Evangelist that "*these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name*" (20:31). Martha's confession is one of the three central confessions in John's Gospel, joining Peter and Thomas (6:69; 20:28); "*her courageous faith in the face of grief and disappointment is remarkable in this proclamation*" (Holmes).

When Martha returns home to the place where her sister Mary has continued to sit *shiva* with the other mourners, Martha informs her that "*the Teacher is here and is calling for you*" (11:28). The scene between Jesus and Mary is not intended to be a private conversation between the two; John reports that Mary's fellow mourners "*followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there*" (11:31). Mary's greeting contains the same complaint and confidence in Jesus as did Martha's greeting: "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*" (11:32). But whereas Martha's greeting became the occasion for Jesus' statement of self-identification, the Evangelist reports on Jesus' response to the weeping of Mary and her fellow mourners: "*he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved*" (11:33). While "deeply moved" is used elsewhere in the New Testament to communicate anger ("*After sternly warning him he sent him away at once*" – Mark 1:43), it might also indicate that Jesus becomes "deeply troubled" as he confronts death itself, which Paul identifies as the enemy ("*The last enemy to be destroyed is death*" – 1 Corinthians 15:26). Jesus is deeply moved due to Mary's response; "*in this way, Mary's actions show her devotion to Jesus, and his mirroring of her response illustrates how he values her faithfulness*" (Holmes).

When Jesus asks the crowds where Lazarus was buried, they invite him to "*come and see*" (11:34). When he hears this, "*Jesus began to weep*" (11:35). While there have been many explanations for Jesus' response, it comes as a direct result of the invitation to come and see where Lazarus is buried, his acknowledgement of the pain that death causes in human life; "*the scale of Jesus' act can only be recognized if the bitterness of physical death is not minimized*" (Rudolf Schnackenburg). The crowd's response to Jesus' weeping is in keeping with the way crowds are described throughout John's gospel as neither faithful witnesses nor interpreters of Jesus' teachings ("*The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.'*" – 12:29). Reference to Jesus' previous miracle of giving sight to the man born blind (9:6-7) suggests that the crowd's speculation as to "*could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from*

dying?” (11:37) were spoken hostilely (“*While some were saying, ‘He is a good man, others were saying, ‘N, he is deceiving the crowds.’*” – 7:12).

When Jesus arrives at Lazarus’ tomb and orders that the stone be taken away, Martha’s words draw attention to the reality of death that confronts Jesus at the tomb: “*Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.*” (11:39). Jewish burial traditions did not involve embalming; the body was anointed with perfume and wrapped (“*They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.*” – 19:40), but after four days the effect of the perfume would have worn off by the odor of the body’s decomposition. Jesus’ response to Martha pulls together everything he has said about the revelatory significance of the miracle he is about to perform: “*Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?*” (11:40). After the stone is removed, Jesus offers a prayer of thanksgiving for his relationship with God in which he also wants to direct the eyes of those who gather at the tomb toward God so that God’s glory will be seen in the miracle; Jesus’ prayer serves to locate the miracle that is about to happen with God, “*so that they may believe that you sent me*” (11:42). The miracle happens when Jesus cries out with a loud voice, “*Lazarus, come out!*” and it is to Jesus’ voice to which Lazarus responds when “*the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth*” (11:43-44). The fact that Lazarus is referred to as the “dead man” and that he is still bound in his grave clothes underscores the magnitude of the miracle; it also demonstrates his faithfulness to Jesus by emerging from the tomb when Jesus calls him, “*because a sheep hear the voice of the shepherd*” (Holmes). Jesus commands the crowds to “*unbind him and let him go*” (11:44); the result of this miracle is that many who had come to mourn with the sisters now “*believed in him*” (11:45).

- “Jesus rejoices because the fact that his prayer is heard leads the crowd to faith, but this is neither arrogance nor showmanship. Because his prayer is heard, they will see a miraculous work which is the work of the Father. Through the exercise of the power of Jesus, which is the power of the Father, they will come to know the Father and thus receive life themselves. Jesus will gain nothing for himself; he wishes only that his audience will come to know the Father who has sent him.” – Raymond Brown.

It was in the presence of the community who came to bear the burden of grief with Martha and Mary that Jesus comes to be present with them, to hold them in his loving arms, and to weep with them. Our presence in the assembly of those who mourn is a most precious gift; Corinne Chilstrom recalls how “*their presence brought stability when our world had fallen apart. It seemed as though they had been sent by God*

and that they brought God to us.” As our Lord has promised to be with us “*always, to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:20) we know that Christ is with us as we gather to mourn and bear each other’s burdens, coming to us as a fellow mourner as he also comes to us with that which only our Lord and Saviour can bring: the promise of resurrection and new life which are ours in our baptism into Christ. It is our confidence that as Christ walks with us as a source of strength and hope in our days of sorrow and sadness, his presence also gives us the assurance that “*from sorrow, toil, and pain, and sin we shall be free; and perfect love and friendship reign through all eternity.*” (ELW Hymn 656).

Amen.