

The Last Sign in John  
John 11:1-44  
Colebrook Congregational Church  
April 2, 2017 / Fifth Sunday in Lent

The Gospel of John was written anonymously, the author only claiming the title of, “The Beloved Disciple,” but it is so close in style and content to the three surviving Letters of John and to the Book of Revelation, that it has been attributed to the same community and tradition, probably originating in Ephesus on the west coast of Turkey or in Syria.

This community, is called the Johannine Community, named for John, and it's writings are more worried about the divine nature of Jesus and theological matters. It also defines itself in contrast to Judaism, not as part of a wider Christian community, like how the other Gospels do. This has also helped to date when this Gospel was written.

During the time of Jesus, there were three main affiliations within Judaism. The Essenes, who were ascetics and mystics. You've heard of the Dead Sea Scrolls? That's these guys. They've kept to themselves. There were Sadducees, who were the aristocratic elite. That group disappeared after the Rebellion against Rome about 40 years after Jesus was crucified. That leaves the Pharisees, who became the Rabbis and the majority of modern Judaism. In the other three Gospels, these three groups are mentioned in some way, but not in John. Only the Pharisees are mentioned by John, suggesting it was written after the Sadducees disappeared. But there are some oddities to John. Some parts, especially The trial, suggest a very accurate eyewitness account of that era's trials, when compared to Matthew and Luke, suggesting that the oral tradition was better preserved. But then that is mixed with biases and arguments indicating later writing and thinking.

The Gospel itself is organized into four parts: A Prologue, a Book of Signs, a Book of Glory, and an Epilogue. Today's selection is from the very end of the Book of Signs, which has seven major signs, interspersed with lots of other events and the “I Am” sayings, like, “I am the light.”

Those signs are mostly familiar. Changing the water into wine at a wedding, healing an official's son, healing a paralytic man who took up his mat and left, the feeding of the five thousand, walking on water, healing a blind man on the Sabbath, and finally, the resurrection of Lazarus.

Today's selection of the Raising of Lazarus is the longest cohesive story arc in John's Gospel and is the culmination of all the signs and miracles that Jesus performs to demonstrate who He is. It is the reason for the authorities' decision to execute Jesus, because it would cause a misunderstanding with the Roman occupiers, who would react with four whole legions. This story also explains the crowds on Palm Sunday, the next part of the Gospel and the start of the Book of Glory, because they heard about how Jesus had raised someone from the dead!

So, it is also a resurrection that leads to death. It is the pivotal moment of John's Gospel, shifting from Jesus' public ministry to the Passion.

John's account set the scene in an odd way. Up til now, this family in Bethany had not yet been mentioned, but from its tone, John is assuming that the listener is familiar with Mary, Martha, & Lazarus; as if the author and community had already heard Luke's Gospel, which feature those three several times. And the weird part is that John references something that hadn't happen yet when he identified Mary. The anointing happens in the next chapter!

Now, in chapter 10, Jesus had caused a ruckus and angered the Pharisees in the Temple in Jerusalem during the Chanukah celebrations and He had to flee out of the province of Judea, crossing the River into modern-day Jordan for safety. And now He is summoned to Bethany to help, but that is back in Judea, only a couple miles from Jerusalem.

This context tells us a couple of things: Why the Disciples did not want to return to Judea; and the distance is far enough that even if Jesus had left for Bethany immediately, He would have been too late. Even so, Jesus decided to wait.

When He decided it was time to go, the Disciples argued with Him. That is like asking to be killed, to them. Jesus replies with a proverb. While there is daylight, Jesus can perform His duty safely and His enemies will be powerless to stop Him until the appointed time. So, He has to go to Lazarus before the “night” comes.

Then Jesus displays His omniscience, knowing that Lazarus was already “asleep,” and as usual, the Disciples misunderstood, so Jesus spoke plainly.

Thomas then stands committed with Jesus to go back into Judea. This is Thomas' first participation in this Gospel, and John has him in a more prominent position than the other three Gospels.

Jesus arrives in Bethany after a couple days of travel. There are already leaders from the synagogue with the family, ones that are not hostile towards Jesus, and is met by Martha, and she rebukes Him for not being there in time. They go back and forth in the usual pattern, with Martha misunderstanding Jesus, but in the opposite way this time. Martha assumes the resurrection is the one at the End, but Jesus meant it literally in this case. Martha believes Him and confesses her faith, naming Him the Messiah and Son of God.

Then Mary goes out to meet Jesus. Where Martha confronted Him in anger, Mary says the same first line as Martha, but in sorrow. Mary prostrates herself and makes hers a statement of faith, not an accusation. And Jesus does not dialogue or question her, because He is so moved by her grief. He follows her to the tomb, offers a prayer to God, then commands Lazarus to come out.

When Jesus joined them in their grief over Lazarus, it was expressed in most English translations as the shortest verse of the New Testament: Jesus wept. The other Gospels focus more on Jesus' humanity and John does prefer to focus on Jesus' divine nature, coming across often as aloof. John does not spare emotions, or suffer fools, or display that much tact when describing Jesus' interactions with other people.

But not here. Here, Jesus wept. Why?? There must have been a lot on Jesus' mind. He was just driven from the Temple with stones. He knows that His time on Earth is almost over. And He's been planning to resurrect Lazarus for days at that point. He knows that in a few minutes, Lazarus will be alive and well again. He doesn't need to shed any tears at this point. But still, Jesus felt so much grief at what was happening that He wept.

And that is comforting. Jesus is involved in a great theological drama that is beyond anyone, but He still cares about His friends and followers, sharing in their pain and suffering. In a story that describes Jesus' penultimate sign, raising someone from the dead, the last sign performed in John's Gospel, the turning point in Jesus' story, the action that sets in motion the Passion where Jesus sacrifices Himself for us all, John wants to make sure that we know that Jesus is still human, and still loves us, and supports us, and comforts us, shares in what happens to us, and will weep with us.

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

God of consolation and compassion, Your Son comforted the grieving sisters, Martha and Mary; Your Word brings us to life, inspiring and renewing our weary souls. Pour out your Spirit upon us, that we may face any adversity, knowing that He is by our side, weeping with us, and with the hope inspired by our faith in the One who called Lazarus forth from the grave. Amen.

## INTERCESSORY PRAYER

[PAUSE]

O God who welcomes all in love, to You we pray for the good of Your church, our community, and the concerns of those in need. We lift up our hearts in faith to You, the one who hears all prayers and holds close all of Creation.

We give you thanks for all the blessings and gifts you have given us, for those you have led into our lives and for moving us into the lives of others. And we thank you for using us as instruments of your divine love for us all.

God of compassion, You know our faults and yet You promise to forgive. Help us to face up to ourselves, so that, as You move toward us in mercy, we may repent, turn to You, and receive mercy;

We offer our prayers for our neighbors and loved ones. We pray for those whose lives are broken by distress, by fear, by anger, by pain, by illness, or by sin. We ask that You gently touch their lives by Your Spirit, bringing Your warmth and comfort, to bring restoration to fractured lives and souls.

We pray for Your guidance in all that we do, to live up to the standard Jesus set for us. Give us strength to live through disappointments and the courage to overcome obstacles. Fill us with Your Spirit and make us living carriers of Your Love to all who need it. Grant us the calmness and serenity needed in this chaotic world.

We especially pray for:

The Stone Family

The Suddath Family

Gracious God, we offer these prayers and all those of our hearts up to you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

### Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

## John 11:1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "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." Accordingly, 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.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "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." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "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. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into

the world."

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.