

# Sermon for Sunday, March 29, 2020 - "Jesus Is Present"

Fifth Sunday in Lent  
Online Worship  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

In this time when we have to stay physically distant and isolated, it's hard to hear that Jesus *chooses* not to go to help his sick friend. He hasn't been instructed to stay at home, he isn't living in a time of mass quarantine, but still Jesus stays where he is for two days after he hears Lazarus is ill.

His dear friends, Mary and Martha, ask him to come and help their brother, but he doesn't come, he doesn't move. Even though they are faithful followers of Jesus, even though he loves them, after Jesus hears Lazarus is sick, he stays put. I find this troubling.

Those of us hearing the story learn that Jesus sees Lazarus' death as an opportunity for the in-breaking of God's glory. But Martha and Mary don't know that. What they know is that Jesus doesn't come right away. Jesus doesn't move quickly to help them when they ask. They know he could have done something and yet, he wasn't there.

In our own lives too, God sometimes seems absent, silent, unmoved by our pleas for help, unresponsive to human suffering. And these days many of us are struggling to experience God's presence when we can't gather in the places and with the people that usually help us to know that God is with us.

Martha and Mary both cry out to Jesus in grief and anger, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." So many people throughout the ages and so many of us have raised similar laments. These cries are found throughout scripture, especially in the Psalms. They are important, faithful things to say to God. Out of the depths we cry to God. I encourage you to bring whatever you are feeling to God in prayer in these days.

Yet, Martha and Mary don't get answers to their laments. Jesus doesn't explain why he delayed in coming. He doesn't tell *them* that he stayed put so that God's glory could later be revealed. He doesn't even say I'm going to raise Lazarus, just wait. They don't get explanations. They don't get answers.

**Instead, they get Jesus.** Mary and Martha get Jesus and they discover Jesus *really is* present with them, even though he delayed, even though he didn't answer their request the way they hoped. They get Jesus and his presence brings new life - not only within Lazarus, but also within Martha and Mary.

We don't get answers either. We don't get explanations as to why suffering, why the coronavirus, why God seems silent sometimes. We also don't get our loved ones back from the tomb, as Martha and Mary did. But we do get Jesus. Jesus is present with us, God is present with us even when

things aren't the way we'd hoped, even when we can't be physically together in worship. Jesus is present with you and his presence gives new life in much the same way he gave new life to Martha, Mary and Lazarus.

Jesus shows Martha and Mary that he *is* truly present with them in how he responds to their laments and grief. He doesn't critique or correct them. He doesn't turn aside or avoid their pain. Instead, he stays engaged and he's deeply moved by their suffering.

When *Martha* says, "Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died," Jesus engages her in conversation. He assures her of God's presence by telling her, "I AM, the resurrection and the life"- using the ancient name of God, the great I AM, for himself. He promises her that God is present and bringing new life now and forever- even when she can't see it. These promises create faith in Martha, they create something new within her. They bring new life and hope where there was only grief and pain.

Those same promises and the presence of Jesus do the same for us. They create faith within us bringing life and hope for us. The great I AM, the resurrection and the life, is with us, God is with you.

Then when *Mary* comes to Jesus with her lament and her tears, Jesus remains present to her pain. We're told that when Jesus sees Mary weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he is greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He doesn't turn away. He doesn't tell her everything will be OK. He begins to weep. Mary finds that she is not alone, Jesus is with her in her pain, sharing her tears. She is given comfort and hope, new life, by Jesus' presence.

Jesus is present with us, sharing our tears and our sorrow as well. God does not turn away, even in the face of deep anguish. God joins us. Whatever you are feeling in these days, God shares in it with you.

Then, after being so present to Martha and Mary, Jesus shows that he can be present even to Lazarus, even though Lazarus is dead. God can reach Lazarus even in the tomb. Nothing, not even death, can separate us from the presence of God. As Romans promises - neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Jesus can reach Lazarus, Jesus can reach us and our loved ones - even in death.

Lazarus is brought back to life on earth, for a time. He goes on to an earthly death again. Yet after Jesus stands at his tomb and calls him out, and after Jesus calls those gathered to unbind him and let him go, Lazarus knows deep in his bones that God is always present for him. He and his sisters know that God's presence means life, now and forever.

Jesus stands now at all the tombs of our world - in all the places where death and evil and sorrow seem to prevail. God is present with us in the hospitals and at the southern border, when earthquakes and tornados strike. God is present at the graveside even when only 10 or fewer can gather to bury our loved ones. God is present with those who have to say goodbye via a video call. God abides with us as we wonder how we'll pay the bills and in the sleepless nights. God is present in all those places and God's presence with us means life.

Jesus is also present calling those around us to unbind us and let us go, calling us to do the same for others. When we are bound by fear and anger and despair, God works through community to set us free into God's abundant life. God works in community even when we are physically distant.

God is present now in the Decorah Area Faith Coalition that is ready to launch a fundraising campaign to help individuals impacted by this crisis. God is present in the neighbors running errands for others and in the volunteers who have signed up to help on the Decorah and Winneshiek County Mutual Aid Network. God is present in all those working to make sure people can access food and medication in safe ways. God is present in all the medical professionals caring for the sick throughout our country and in so many other ways.

God is with us. God is with you.

You share now in the eternal life of Jesus - the life that will come and be present in the midst of death, the life that calls forth new life in us, in you.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.