

Inside the Tomb – John 11:1-41 – March 29, 2020

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Earlier this week our governor told us to stay home, realizing the best way to flatten the curve, the best way to curtail spread of Covid-19, is to stay away from other people outside your home. My biggest struggle has been keeping my cats under control! I am wondering if that sounds strange to you – a little background. These cats are all rescues, one of which belonged to my mom. They are all older than 14 years, making them geriatric in the cat world. They are a tad cantankerous and rather set in their ways. They are not fond of one another – the two males have a grudging tolerance for one another – but otherwise, my newest identity has become referee amongst the felines, who, for one, don't know why I won't leave the house, two, are upset that I am rearranging the office space, and three, are constantly growling and hissing at one another as they all jockey for positions nearest to me, their one human.

Perhaps this scenario holds a semblance of truth for many of you. Though, your participants may be of the human or canine variety, and span a wider diversity of personality traits and ages. We, who have, until late, had the freedom to come and go at regular intervals have been thrust into close quarters. Even those of us who live alone may struggle with our newfound isolation. I often catch myself speaking aloud – the cats never answer.

Add to this confinement the uncertainty of not knowing what comes next. The messages we receive from our televisions and the internet are at best, vague, and at worst, contradictory. It is difficult to know who to believe and what to trust. And our isolation from each other exacerbates the situation. We are social creatures, needing one another to survive and thrive. We are disconnected from our social networks, and for many of us, we are denied the fulfillment of a very basic need for human touch.

To say this is a difficult time, seems almost flippant at this point, because we are all literally in this together. We are used to facing difficulties in our lives. But those are isolated events, affecting one person, or family, or even one community. But in those tragedies, we can still rely on our systems of support – we can depend on those who have not been affected, to be the support we need. But now, in our mutual trial, our systems of support are also impacted.

As we begin to settle into this period of social isolation, we can and will experience a number of emotions – some of which might be fear, worry, loneliness, frustration, anxiety, sadness, anger. I read an article earlier this week – I can't even remember what it was, but the writer was talking about how this is a time of real grieving. We are experiencing a loss, even multiple losses. With loss comes grief – and all the assorted emotions that come with that.

The story in John's Gospel of the raising of Lazarus has at its heart an example of great loss. Here are the facts – Jesus is close friends with a group of siblings, Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

He receives word that Lazarus is very ill, but intentionally holds off from going to visit right away. When he does decide to go, his disciples are concerned for his safety. They experience fear and confusion, but go with him out of loyalty.

As they drew near, Martha runs out to him. Lazarus has died. She wishes he had come sooner, thinking that Jesus could have prevented Lazarus' death, but even now has hope that he can do something, believing him to be the Messiah. Next Mary comes, she is overcome with grief as she falls at his feet. Mixed with her tears, her words seem accusing and blaming as she too believes if he had just arrived sooner, Lazarus would have lived. The mourners who had followed Mary from the house, were also weeping.

Seeing this scene of grief, Jesus feels an intense gut-wrenching pain and he too begins to weep. He is not just sniffing; he is experiencing the full-on weight of their grief and is joining them down in it. He feels their pain, sadness, anger, loss, longing, blame – just as fresh and raw as they felt it. – And this is what I so love about this story. – Jesus knew what he was about to do. He knew he could and would raise Lazarus from the dead. The story alludes to that throughout. He knew their time of grief would not last. He knew that the darkness and death of the tomb would be opened to the light of day, and new life would come walking out. But instead of swooping down into the scene in like a larger-than-life super-hero and saving the day, Jesus walked directly into this moment of agonizing grief and stood with his two friends and mourned with them the devastating loss of their brother.

Even while knowing the end of the story, Jesus still joins us in the midst of our fears and our uncertainties. He understands the reality and pain of loss; he has experienced grief, and he willingly endures our incessant questions of why didn't you get here sooner and stop this from happening. In him we have a future – in him, we have hope and life. But in the meantime, as we hunker down into our dark tombs of uncertainty, fear, and frustration, we can trust in a God who understands and stands with us in the reality of loss and grief.