

# Parishes of St Philips and All Saints Kew with St Luke's Kew

Where all God's children are Welcome

## Bible Study for the first week of the Covid 19 church building closure

### Section 3: John 11: 1-15

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.)<sup>3</sup> So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."<sup>4</sup> When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."<sup>5</sup> Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.<sup>6</sup> So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days,<sup>7</sup> and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."<sup>8</sup> "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?"<sup>9</sup> Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world's light.<sup>10</sup> It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light."<sup>11</sup> After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."<sup>12</sup> His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better."<sup>13</sup> Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.<sup>14</sup> So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead,<sup>15</sup> and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."<sup>16</sup> Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

<sup>17</sup> On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.<sup>18</sup> Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem,<sup>19</sup> and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother.<sup>20</sup> When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.<sup>21</sup> "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died.<sup>22</sup> But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."<sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."<sup>24</sup> Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."<sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;<sup>26</sup> and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"<sup>27</sup> "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."<sup>28</sup> After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you."<sup>29</sup> When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him.<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.<sup>31</sup> When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

<sup>32</sup> When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."<sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.<sup>34</sup> "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied.<sup>35</sup> Jesus wept.<sup>36</sup> Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"<sup>37</sup> But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"<sup>38</sup> Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid

across the entrance. <sup>39</sup>“Take away the stone,” he said. “But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.” <sup>40</sup>Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” <sup>41</sup>So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. <sup>42</sup>I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.” <sup>43</sup>When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” <sup>44</sup>The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

**Prayer:** Almighty God, giver of life and sustainer of us all: hear our prayer as we seek to understand your ways. Open this Gospel passage to us, that we may see Christ as he really is, and love and serve him all our days. Amen

Read the passage through twice.

### **Background**

In John’s Gospel, Jesus travels to Jerusalem much more than he does in the other three Gospels. However, things are not straightforward when he is there, and hostility towards him has been growing, especially since he healed the man born blind in Chapter 9, which we read last Sunday. After that healing, Jesus and his disciples went back to Galilee, in the north of the country, where Jesus was further from the reach of the Temple authorities. However, when the call comes that his friend Lazarus is seriously ill, a decision has to be taken.

### **Some questions:**

This is a really difficult story.

- Why did Jesus delay his journey to Lazarus?
- Who gained by this delay? Who lost out?
- Why all the clunky stuff about “falling asleep”?
- Thomas’s statement, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” – is it deeply cynical, or worldweary, or defiant?

By the time they all get there, Lazarus is well and truly dead. There was a belief at the time that the human spirit hovered over a dead body for the first three days after death, but then it left the body behind and travelled to God.

Lazarus’s sister Martha is the first to confront Jesus.

- Is she justified in her complaint?
- How strong is her faith – in God? In Jesus?
- How helpful is Jesus’s statement, “your brother will rise again”? Martha naturally understands it in the perspective of eternity, but Jesus is speaking of the here and now
- “I am the resurrection and the life” What does Jesus really mean by that?
- This leads Martha to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah – does it persuade you?

The exchange between Jesus and Mary, Lazarus’s other sister, is altogether different. Mary uses the same words as her sister, but Jesus’s reaction is very different.

- Why the two reactions?
- Why did Jesus answer Martha with theology, and Mary with shared tears?

- This might reflect a Christ who comes to us in a tailored way, suitable for our character and levels of understanding, for how we are feeling at that particular moment. Is this how you experience his response to your prayers and questions?

Jesus moves to the site of the tomb. Overcome with emotion, he weeps.

- There are two reactions to his tears – “see how he loved him” and “why didn’t he do something sooner?” Why does humanity divide like this in its reactions to public shows of emotion? Can we not be more generous when others are showing their inner feelings?

Now the detail of the story becomes important. Lazarus is buried in a tomb hollowed out from a rock face, with a stone rolled across the opening....

- Pure coincidence?
- What connections are we supposed to make as we read this?
- Put yourself in the shoes of someone hearing this for the first time, reading the Gospel of John from the beginning. They do not know how the story of Jesus will pan out – what thoughts would be going through such a reader’s mind?
- For us, who know the whole story very well, we cannot read this text in such an innocent fashion: we know what the writer is doing. How does that make you feel? Manipulated? Privileged? Questioning?

We have had the theology of the situation, and the demonstration of strong human emotion from Jesus: now the ground of the narrative shifts again. As we discovered in the Ezekiel passage, reality and parable can merge, and the text start to operate on different levels. Outwardly, from this point on, this is the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, restoring him alive and well to his sisters and his community. On the contextual level, this is a foretelling of Christ’s Passion, but with some very important differences

- Lazarus is summoned from the tomb – Jesus has already left the tomb by the time the women arrive
- Lazarus is still wearing his grave clothes – Jesus’s grave clothes are folded up and placed on the shelf where his body had been placed
- The command, “unbind him and let him go” comes from an exorcism ritual – Lazarus’s death has been the work of an evil spirit, who has bound him in death and the grave. Jesus liberates Lazarus from the power of evil and restores him to fulness of life, in exactly the same way that the man born blind had been liberated or anyone else that Jesus heals.
- In Christ’s resurrection, that liberation from the bonds of evil and death are made available to the whole world, including you and me.

The passage finishes with the assertion that “Many of the Jews ... who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him”.

- Does this text help you in your faith? How?
- Would you recommend this text to someone who was struggling with faith? Who was new to faith?

**Reread the passage, out loud if possible**

**To review:**

- Jesus delays his arrival at Lazarus’s house until he is definitely dead
- Jesus has a theological agenda in doing that
- Jesus displays deeply human emotions in this story
- The Evangelist is doing more than telling the story of the raising of Lazarus – he is preparing us for the events of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Day.

**Final Questions:**

- What have you learnt about God from this passage?
- How has your picture of Jesus changed after reading and studying this passage?
- How will your approach to Holy Week and Easter be affected by this study?

**Prayer:** Loving God, thank you that your creative, life-affirming power lifts us from our solitude into the glorious company of all your people. Open our hearts to your Holy Spirit, that we may know a daily resurrection from fear and anxiety, from doubt and ignorance, and so rejoice in your presence all the days of our life. Amen