

This story, perhaps better than any other in the Gospels, shows us that Jesus is both truly God and fully human. Not just God, disguised as a man; not just a man, with an air of divinity; but the one and only God-man.

In his encounter with Martha, he says, “I am the resurrection and the life.” That’s a claim of deity. Only God can give life and take it away. Jesus does not say, “I can revive Lazarus because I have special access to supernatural power.” He says, “I AM the resurrection and the Life. I AM the power that gives everything life and keeps everything alive.”

This isn’t the only place that Jesus makes a claim like this: he points to his divinity all through the Gospels. These claims are troubling to many, and so there is a strong desire to downplay Jesus as simply a really good man, or a great teacher, or a wise sage. The founders of every other major religion said, “I am the prophet who shows you the way to find God,” but Jesus said, “I am God, come to find you.”

The life of Jesus, as attested to in the Gospels, bears this out. When Jesus meets Martha we get a glimpse of his deity and power: he is God, able to raise Lazarus from death to life. But that doesn’t explain the totality of who Jesus is, for in the very next moment he breaks down sobbing beneath the weight of Mary’s grief and in the shadow of the grave. Here we see deity’s power joined to human vulnerability. God is one with us.

What we have in Jesus is something that is pretty hard to believe, and even harder to describe. Jesus is not 50% human and 50% God. He’s not just a human being with a particularly high God consciousness, or a divine figure with the illusion of a physical body. He is absolutely God, but also totally human. Christians believe that the transcendent creator, the author of life, became a weak, limited mortal who felt the full horror of death. Christians have struggled with this idea for millennia. Here, as we watch Jesus respond to Mary and Martha, we see that a divine-yet-human Jesus is exactly what we need, too.

Jesus gives Martha what she needs most at that moment: the ministry of truth. He figuratively grabs her by the shoulders with the truth. “Listen to me! Don’t despair. I’m here. I am the Resurrection Life. That’s who I am.” The divine Jesus points Martha to the hope of the heavenly kingdom. Then, when he meets Mary, Jesus gives her the ministry of tears. The human Jesus steps into her sorrow – with complete sincerity and integrity – and weeps with her. In life, sometimes we need a ministry of truth and sometimes we need a ministry of

tears. Sometimes we need to be shaken by a loving friend who says, “Wake up and look around you!” Other times we just need someone to cry with us.

So Jesus is God become human. Which leaves us wondering, “Why did he do it? Why did absolute power enter the world in weakness?” To answer that, we need to look at the last part of the story.

I get frustrated with virtually every English translation of verse 38. Most accounts say something like, “Then Jesus, greatly disturbed, came to the tomb.” Greatly disturbed. What a weak translation! It’s much too tame a response because the original Greek word really means “to bellow with rage.” Jesus is angry. He’s roaring at death and the pain of the human condition. He’s mad at evil and suffering, and he’s not going to take it anymore.

Jesus is mad because evil and death are the result of human sin and not part of God’s original design. God didn’t make, nor did God intend for the world to be filled with sickness, suffering, and death. God could come and fix it all. In an instant God could wipe the whole mess away, but it would all come back because what’s really wrong in the world today is what’s in the human heart. God had to find a way to fix the human heart, to wipe it clean, which is why God sent Jesus.

But if Jesus, as the Son of God, had come with sword in hand to set things right, wielding divine justice and weeding out the impure hearts, none of us would have been left standing. And if Jesus, as the Son of Man, had come to stand with us in our suffering, nothing would have changed. So instead, Jesus came, not with sword in hand, but with nails in his hands. God-become human, not to bring about our judgment, but to bear our judgment.

Jesus knew there would be consequences for his actions. He knew that if he raised Lazarus from the dead, the Pharisees would see and fear his power, and they would try to kill him (v. 53). Jesus knew that bringing Lazarus out of the grave would put him into his own grave. Jesus knew the only way to interrupt Lazarus’ funeral was to summon his own. That’s why, when Jesus approached the tomb, instead of smiling at the prospect of raising his friend and winning hearts, he was shaking with anger and had tears on his cheeks. He knew what it would cost him to save us from death. The witnesses said about Jesus, “See how he loved Lazarus”; but really we must behold how much Jesus loves us. He became human, vulnerable, kill-able all out of love for us. God invaded our world in order to save us. God wrote Jesus into the human story to rewrite our ending.

The author Dorothy Sayers, one of the first women to go to Oxford University, was a great writer of detective fiction. She wrote a series of novels, in which the primary character, Lord Peter Wimsey, is an aristocratic detective, single and alone. In the middle of the series, a tall, not particularly attractive woman name Harriet Vane appears in the stories. Harriet is one of the first women to attend Oxford and she is a writer of detective fiction. She and Peter fall in love, get married, and solve mysteries together. Sayers looked into the world she created – into the character she created – and saw his pain, his loneliness, fell in love with him, and wrote herself into the story just to save him.

God, you see, has done quite the same thing. God looked into our world – the world God made – and saw us destroying ourselves and the world by turning away from God. It filled God’s heart with pain (Gen. 6:6). God loved us, saw us struggling to extricate ourselves from the traps and misery we created for ourselves, and so God wrote God’s self into our story. Jesus, the God-man, born in a manger, born to die on a cross for us. See how Jesus loves you and how he came to put the world right.

This sermon is inspired by Timothy Keller. *Encounters with Jesus*. (New York, Dutton, 2013), 40-57.

## The Grieving Sisters

Sunday, June 1, 2014

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

***John 11:17-44***

John 11 tells the story of Jesus and his relationship with two sisters, Mary and Martha, and their brother, Lazarus. Early in the chapter, Lazarus is called someone whom Jesus loved (v. 5), a term used in the gospels to describe Jesus’ most intimate disciples. Jesus, Lazarus, Mary and Martha were close, practically family. Now Lazarus is deathly ill. The sisters send word, but Jesus delays, and Lazarus dies. When Jesus finally arrives, the community is in mourning for Lazarus, who is already in the tomb. What Jesus does next is one of the most famous incidents in history; it is also one of the most revealing, showing us not only who Jesus is but what he came to do.

Jesus met Martha first. When Martha heard Jesus was near, she went out to greet him, and she told him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (v. 21). Just moments later, Mary comes out and says the same thing: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (v. 32). Two sisters, same situation, exactly the same words, but strikingly Jesus’ responses are sharply different. When Martha speaks, Jesus challenges her. To her message that he came too late, Jesus replies, “I am the resurrection and the life! With me it’s never too late.” The flow of her heart is toward despair, but Jesus is pushing against that flow. He’s rebuking her doubt and giving her hope.

Then he sees Mary, who uses the very same words, but this time Jesus’ response is the complete opposite. He doesn’t argue - in fact, he’s practically speechless – and instead of pushing against the flow of her heart’s sadness, he enters it. He stands alongside Mary in her grief. He bursts into tears and can only say, “Where is he?” (v. 34). Jesus responds to each sister according to their need: Martha needs a Savior who will raise her brother from the dead; Mary needs a friend with whom to grieve.