

March 26, 2023
The Fifth Sunday in Lent
Year A
John 11:1-45
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Losing and Winning

Have you ever entered a situation and been pretty confident that you would were going to win? It's a good feeling, isn't it? I mean, it's all well and good to play the game with the illusion of an unknown outcome, but too much doubt, too much uncertainty can be stressful. It's better if you feel confident, self-assured, relaxed.

That's how I felt yesterday, after I dragged myself home from the Confirmation lock-in around four-thirty in the afternoon. I was really tired, but I had something to look forward to. The UConn Women's Basketball team was playing in its 29th Sweet Sixteen, in a row. It's been to the Elite Eight 16 times in a row. It's been to the Final Four 14 times in a row. It has won 11 national championships. The last time the UConn women lost in the Sweet Sixteen of the NCAA championship was in 2005. So, it was reasonable that I thought that they were going to win; that I thought that watching the game would be a relaxing thing to do after a couple of very long and busy days.

The very first words in our gospel reading for today tell us that the situation is serious. "Now a certain man was ill" (John 11:1a). How do I know that the situation is serious? I mean, this "certain man" could have just had a cold. The text doesn't initially and explicitly state that the man is seriously ill. But it goes on to tell us his name, Lazarus, and where he lives, Bethany John 11:1b). It sounds to me like a 911 call. "911, what's your emergency?" "Now a certain man is ill, Lazarus, of Bethany, Mary's brother, send help quick."

The sisters, Martha and Mary, know that Lazarus's situation is serious. They're concerned, but they're not panicked, because they have what they believe is the ace in the hole. They know who to call and, in this situation, it's not 911. They know what will

save their brother. They know who will save their brother. They're going to call on Jesus and they know that Jesus will listen. They know that Jesus will come and heal their brother. They're playing the game, but they know that they're going to win. Because they know that Jesus loves them, and their brother. They know it, the author of the gospel of John knows it; he tells us so, that Jesus loved Martha and her sister Lazarus (John 11:5). Of course, he will come and save the day. So, they send a message to Jesus, "Lord, he who you love is ill." Even though they don't explicitly state it, their message, their hope is clear. Jesus, come and heal our brother.

There I was yesterday, settled in on my couch, watching the game, and at first it was exactly what I expected. My team was winning. Dare I say, of course? It's not like I think that they can't be beaten. They've lost more games this season this year than they have in many years. But still, they've been playing more like the UConn teams of old, in the postseason. They've been playing up to the their individual and team potential this postseason. So, I figured that they would win this game, if not easily, then at least decisively.

About midway through the second quarter I had to give that idea up. They were behind and were making all kinds of forced and unforced errors. They couldn't hang onto the basketball and they couldn't find their offense. They were disrupted, discombobulated, disorganized. I would say that it was stressful except it really wasn't, it wasn't what you'd call a cliffhanger. It was just sad watching them play so badly, but at no point from the second quarter on did it really look like it would be a suspenseful game. It was pretty clear from that point that on that Ohio State was going to win.

It's a horrible feeling to know that you, or your team, is going to win something and then find out that you're wrong.

Of course, winning or losing a basketball game is nothing like the life or death situation that Martha and Mary and Lazarus faced. As they waited, and waited, two days

after their message had to have been received by Jesus, for him to come and help them, for him to come and heal Lazarus.

But he didn't come. And Lazarus got sicker and sicker, and finally, he died. Martha and Mary had to watch their brother sicken and finally die. They had been sure that he would be all right, that Jesus would come and fix everything, and he hadn't come.

No basketball or any other analogy will stand in for what that must have felt like. Can we imagine the shock, the horror, the hollow emptiness, the grief, the anger that those two sisters felt?

Last week we saw Jesus, who can heal with a word or a touch go through the machinations of making mud with his own spit, to heal a blind man. And I, in my sermon, wondered why.

This week, we see Jesus, who could have turned his power and attention to Lazarus across the miles and healed him from a distance, not show up at all. He didn't heal Lazarus and Lazarus died. Talk about losing.

And still we are left to wonder why. Jesus' love is stated in the gospel reading. Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, but still, he didn't go.

Have you ever shown up for something almost certain that you were going to lose? It's a terrible feeling, right?

Last night, after the disastrous basketball game, I had one more thing to do. In a sparkling example of being unable to manage my own schedule, I said yes when my sister asked me to come to a fundraiser for the Cleveland Elementary School where my nephews' go to school and where all of my children spent at least some of their elementary school years. It was trivia night. In addition to Morgan and Mark, some of our neighbors and friends would also be there. It would be fun.

But as it got closer and I realized how tired I would be after the Confirmation Lock-in, 23 hours with kids in the church, after a full work day and a busy week, I started to think that I had made a bad decision. I mean, really, what was I thinking that I could get

home from the Lock-In at 4:00 and then be ready to go and attend a fun social event at 7:00?

Besides, I'm not very good at trivia and I needed to be up and ready for Sunday too. Clearly, I also had a sermon to write. And my basketball team had just lost. This was going to be a disaster. I mean, it's all well and good to spend time with family and neighbors and friends, until you lose them a trivia game, because you're too tired to speak in complete sentences.

Martha and Mary were in the midst of their mourning. All was lost, their brother was dead, and the community, their friends and neighbors and relatives had gathered to grieve with them. There was no hope. Even their period of mourning was coming to an end. Lazarus had been dead, dead and buried for four days, in the tomb, and there was nothing for his sisters to do but weep.

And then, finally and far too late, Jesus showed up. I wonder if Martha went out to Jesus to give him a piece of her mind. I wonder if she went out to meet him to keep him away from Mary, whose grief or whose anger toward the friend, who they called "Lord", might lead to words being said that would be too much; too intense for anyone to hear, too raw to be spoken out loud.

Martha said, "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" (John 11:21).

Martha amazingly enough, through her tears, her anger, her disappointment, believes that Jesus has power, believes that Jesus can do wonders. But did she believe that Jesus could do what Jesus ultimately did? She clearly believes in the resurrection, she trusts that her brother will rise again on the last day. Did she believe that Jesus could bring hope, could bring life to her, to her sister, to Lazarus now?

Of course, that's exactly what Jesus did.

After talking with Mary, after weeping at Lazarus's tomb, Jesus did what it's possible that no one truly believed that he could do. He spoke the words that turned death into life. He spoke to the open tomb, "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11:43).

And then, and I can't emphasize this strongly enough, I want you to hear it, not just with your ears, but with your soul, so that the hairs on your arms stand up, so that a chill runs up your spine, not like you're hearing a ghost story but like you're witnessing a miracle, and then, "The dead man came out" (John 11:44).

Lazarus was alive again. Not a reanimated corpse, not a zombie, not a ghost, not a horror story, but alive, himself again, healed and living, able to hug his sisters, and his funeral turned it a feast, a celebration, a re-birth day party. And that miserable feeling, that gut wrenching feeling of knowing that you don't have a chance, that there is no hope, turned into the feeling of a win that came out of nowhere, made even sweeter, for not seeing it coming, for it not being expected, for it being a total gift, a surprise, a miracle, beyond your wildest hopes.

Not that you can compare resurrection with a trivia game, but talk about unexpected, for those who are wondering, I didn't fall asleep at trivia night. I even helped with some answers. And I had a great time. And for a table full of people who have never played trivia before, except for one very competitive neighbor, we did pretty well. We came in second, lost by 2 points. And it was a lot of fun. Okay, back to Jesus....

It is true, that Jesus can and does heal. He healed in the gospels, he healed in the early church, and he heals even today, even now. There are stories, that we have heard or seen or lived of healing that has come out of nowhere.

But that is not Jesus' primary mission, because, everyone who is healed in whatever way that they are healed, still dies, somehow, someday. Even Lazarus who lived again also died again, long ago.

Jesus comes to give us what can never be taken away from us, not just life, but eternal life, life that disease or accident or violence can never take away from us, life that is beyond the chances and changes of this world.

Lazarus's story tells us that Jesus can give us wins that we can hardly even imagine. But even his thrilling story is not the whole story. It is just a glimpse of the full life that comes to us in the resurrection of the dead, not to life but for eternal life. It is the ultimate win, and for it we hope. Amen.