

John 11: 1-8, 31-35; Revised Standard Version. 11:1... ***Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2... Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. 3... So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." 4... But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." 5...Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, 6... after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. 7... Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." 8...The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews are just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?"***

Moving to the point of the text where Jesus has gone to Bethany—

31... The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32... When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." 33... When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34... He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." 35... Jesus began to weep.

Prior Experience in the Deep Things of the World

Black History Month is different this year.

Black History Month is different because of last spring and summer
and fall

As Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd
found each other on cruel common ground.

On that cruel common ground, those three held each other's hands then,
together, they reached out their hands to us.

Gradually, then suddenly, the truth

of what (more) of us needed to know
and what (more) of us needed to be doing
rose from beneath us and made a fresh purpose known.

So this is not a Black History Month
even remotely like last year's Black History Month
when in too many places, [not at ELPC, but in too many places],
we were STILL settling for nothing more than the ritualistic
re-telling of one of the nation's favorite pieces of fiction
presented as fact.

The piece of fiction I'm referring to is the story in which in 1955
a woman just happened to refuse to relinquish her seat
on a segregated Montgomery, Alabama bus
and just happened to spark a totally unplanned city-wide bus boycott.

You all know better.

At ELPC, you know that the woman, Rosa Parks,
had had years of training in oppression resistance,
that she was secretary of the local NAACP chapter,
that she had been selected, with her agreement, to refuse to obey
what the entire Black community of Montgomery
and countless communities beyond it
knew to be an unjust law—

Equally important, many of you already knew
That the carefully and strategically planned Montgomery Bus Boycott -
was consistent with a long-held **pattern of practice**
of resistance to segregation, mistreatment, and injustice in Alabama
coupled with intelligent assessment in many places
of how African Americans
could eke out tiny scraps of progress
from every system staged against them.

Since I'm speaking to you from Birmingham let's add this:

In early 1721, a slaver (a ship of captives from Africa),
the *Afriquain*, docked in Biloxi,
part of the French Louisiana Colony -
in what later became Mississippi.

It had sailed from Saint-Malo, France to
Whydah, West Africa, on the coast of what is today, Benin.

Whydah had a massive market where Europeans, including the French, competed actively with one another to buy captives and provisions for the trip to the New World.

In the 1720s captives were sometimes purchased with gunpowder.

In March 1721, **(300 years ago next month)**

182 of the surviving captives brought to Biloxi arrived in Mobile to begin the 'bulking up' of the Black population of what would later become Alabama; *they came enslaved*.

Historians inform us that of those 182 captives,

(given the ratios the French preferred)

there would have been 118 males and 64 females.

27% of them would have been children; 48 of them under age 15.

And, from everything I can tell from my research thus far,

resistance had begun at the point of capture in Africa
resistance continued to, and in, the New World
Resistance has never ceased.

— — The Montgomery Bus Boycott should have come as no surprise.

Thanks to the head start and sense of direction given to us

by Carter G. Woodson, the Father of Black History Week, in 1926

We continue to do the digging and ask the questions

such that our present situation is less of a mystery to us—

May the voices for change continue to increase.

Because of 2020, for **additional** numbers of people
in this country and around the world

the acceptability of approaching Black History Month
as a low-risk, minimal investment,

simple turn of the page of a calendar

burst like a cheap bubble from a disreputable toy store.

My friends, we come to Black History Month this year
with prior experience.

We have vivid and immediate and heart-breaking

prior experience in one of the Deep Things of this World.

A Deep Thing is a thing that is more. It may present, initially,
as something we have encountered and dealt with before

but it is sizable in scope, complex in ramifications,
and often, as we discover,
knows a number of things we don't.

Good deep things can move us.
Bad deep things - including challenges - can move us

We recognize Deep by how it moves us.
There is a stirring inside, an awakening,
a brush of immeasurability across our awareness

a sense that we are in close proximity to one of the things
we human beings are created to touch, or endure, or become,
or devise, or understand, *or change*.

Deep can be when something you need to know about another person
or group of persons
Sits you down and talks to you *clear*.

In my years preaching I have tried to keep to this:
'Oh God, if You pick the text and talk to me, I'll do the work.'

For today, the text God chose was John 11, verse 35.
In the Revised Standard Version: ***Jesus began to weep.***
In the King James Version: ***Jesus wept.***
It is the shortest verse in the 66 Books of the Bible
But/and, it is a problematic verse.

Two things -
First, that tiny verse - ***Jesus wept***
is found in the midst of one of the most dense and complicated chapters
the gospels have to offer.
All kinds of things are going on in this text.

And also, (about our verse),
it is not quite possible to say definitively
that we know for sure what John 11:35 - ***Jesus began to weep*** - means.

Nevertheless, as I began to sweat it out (Oh, God, why this?) I noticed
(You all are a sharp bunch, though,

so you all probably already realized)

That **we are already** in one of the most dense chapters
in our nation's history and in our own lives;
All kinds of things are going on in this moment.

Pandemic, Social Justice, Crippled Economy,
Climate Change, Income Inequality
and a nation struggling to choose
between being wise-and-worthy, or being self-impressed—

And, for us it is not quite possible to say definitively
that we know for sure what this means.
It this an end? It this a beginning? Or could it be the end of a beginning
that sets up the possibility for a better middle? Who can say?

As the popular song once put it-
Makes me wanna holler, throw up both my hands.

These days it would appear
that we are having vast and unprecedented experience in
the Deep Things of This World.
It's awful, it's wonderful, it's horrific, it's startling, it's difficult to describe
and so far, it's very hard to understand.

As our scripture opens,
Mary, Martha and Lazarus are siblings,
and they live together.
We don't know why none of them are married
but they appear not to be; they are for each other.
Lazarus' name is a shortened version of Eleazar, which means, "God helps."

The Lazarus-Mary-Martha family group is living in Bethany.
Bethany is in the region of Judea, two miles from Jerusalem.

Bethany isn't just a village, it's a neighborhood.
People know each other, care about each other, look out for each other.
It's like a church, or like Pittsburgh with its plethora of neighborhoods.
And, people in Bethany know people in Jerusalem
The Martha-Lazarus-Mary group
is connected to their neighbors nearby In Bethany
and their neighbors just a little farther on, in Jerusalem.

As our scripture opens,
Jesus is living, traveling and conversing with his disciples and, no doubt,
some others, including some women
who travel with the group, or meet up with the group occasionally.
After all, *somebody has to cook*.

Jesus is friends with Lazarus, Mary, and Martha.
Each of them is his friend.
Jesus is also friends with his disciples *despite the fact*
that the teaching is going well but the learning - not so well.
And...The Jesus group is friends
with the Mary-Lazarus-Martha group.
What I'm trying to say is that there is a great deal of connection
between these people
They show up for each other.
There is love.

As our scripture opens, all appears to be fine, normal... however—

Jesus' time physically walking and teaching and healing on this earth
is drawing to a close

The danger to Jesus from religio-political forces
in the region near Bethany
is rapidly on the rise

Lazarus is about to fall dangerously ill

Mary and Martha will soon send for, then pray for,
then *beg* for Jesus to come to Lazarus' rescue

and evil, sin, pride, indifference, greed, denial and fear
are already present on the scene here and there...
as the scriptures warn us, they almost always are.

In other words, all the elements for things to go deep are in place.
This time last year
all the elements for things to go deep with us were in place
we just didn't perceive it yet.

The Action in our text is set in motion in this way:

Lazarus gets sick unto death, Mary and Martha send for Jesus,
Jesus doesn't go.
He stays in his ministry work; he continues his teaching.

After a time Jesus says, we're going to Judea.
His disciples are horrified and remind him that the last time he was there
officials tried to kill him.

Jesus explains that Lazarus has fallen asleep, he's going to wake him up.
The disciples say what's the problem? If he's sleeping, that's fine.

Jesus says that Lazarus is dead; he has passed.
Then he adds:
that it is good that he didn't go to Lazarus before he died.
Now they will **all** go to Lazarus so... that his disciples may believe.
Jesus' disciples respond: "Say what?"

Groups On The Move:

The Jesus group crosses over the River Jordan heading west into Judea.
The Bethany crowd shows up for the grieving Mary and Martha.
The Jerusalem group shows up for the grieving Mary and Martha.
The Jesus group shows up for the grieving Mary and Martha.

When Mary rises to leave the house,
the others think she is going to weep at Lazarus' tomb.
They are not going to leave her to cry alone, so they follow her.

**That's how it happens that everybody is there
when Mary and Jesus meet.**

Mary tells Jesus that she knows he could have saved Lazarus
if he had just been able to *make it in* on time.
She believes... but considers that the timing worked against them—

Everybody begins to weep.

Into that vale of tears,
even as he continues to cope with the struggle
of trying to bring those who want to believe to faith
Jesus asks a question that *in its nature*
confirms the reality that his friend Lazarus is now 4 days dead-and-buried:
He asks: "Where have you laid him?"
Through their tears, the oddly mixed multitude says,

“Lord, come and see.”

Jesus begins to weep. Jesus weeps.

There are problematic deep things we shall not banish from this earth.
There are mountains we are not destined to move.
That’s where Jesus comes in.

There he stands, One foot in The Here and the other foot in the Here After
With full prior and personal experience,
in all the deep things of the world *except one*.

And,

If/when he raises his friend-so-dear, Lazarus, from the dead,
Jesus will - willingly - “seal the deal” so to speak
in bringing about his own death.

On behalf of Lazarus, soon, Jesus will act. But first, he weeps.
On behalf of all of us— Mary, Martha, the Bethany people,
the guests from Jerusalem, the disciples, hangers on,
Edward at the Organ,
ELPC Sound at the microphones,
worship-candle-lighting families & individuals in their homes,
Fauci, taking a walk hand-in-hand with his wife
a struggling 14-year-old wandering Sunday morning Mexican streets
all dear, all beloved, you and me—
Soon, Jesus will raise his face to God!
Then, he will raise his hand to do what we cannot do.
He will give Death a command, and give Time another,
and restore Lazarus to the world...

But first, he joins us in doing
what we sometimes Need To Do —

How very deep a moment can be —
Jesus weeps.

Life can be so deep, beloved of the Most High.
Some things go better than we’d hoped, and there is wonder...
Some things go worse—
then, later, sometimes, make more sense than they did at the time,

or not

And some things are just hard, difficult, complicated, nuanced...*tough*.

Racism is a mean, cruel old evil piece of earthly business
with roots more than a millennium LONG.

But just because it's old and long doesn't mean it's permanent.

It's ours to figure out, and it's ours to uproot and destroy.

We are called to do this,..... but we are not alone in this struggle—

Old Folks wisely say (and I'm a fully qualified Old Folk now)

God may not come when you want God to come
But God's always Right on Time.

Jesus our friend, our Savior,

our **all-Experienced in the Deep Things of This World and more,**

is always right on time. He abides,

caring for us, caring about us,

at times even caring in us when it is beyond us to care—

There is love.

We are loved

and it's not just that we are loved—

You are loved..fiercely, firmly, joyously, immeasurably.

You and yours are loved.

So...Weeping may last for a night, but joy comes in the morning—

joy does come... *and so can change.*

Ask Lazarus. *God helps.*

In losing the three— Breonna and Ahmaud and George - *and so many others*
after the tears,

it was time to pray-and-work such that they did not give their lives in vain.

I, for one, am convinced that they did not.

We will do everything we can to ensure they did not die for nothing.

So. Let's Walk On, Children; let us **not** grow weary.

In your Facing Systemic Racism group

In your wonderful worship and the many activities of ELPC

With your marvelous ministers and musicians and members

and technical staff and cleaning crew

and assorted blessed-and-highly-favored keepers of the flame.

In the connections, the friendship, the love...

*Let us march on 'til vic-to-ry... is won; We've got the best of all possible help
in the work we are determined to complete.*

Thank you, Jesus, for everything You have done for us,
are doing for us,
and will yet do for us.

AMEN and AMEN.