

“How Does This Story Make Us Feel?”

John 11:1–45

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

March 26, 2023

The lengthy story from John 11 that our children have read so well is very familiar. We read parts of it at funerals quite often. We have heard many sermons and lectures on various textual and theological themes it develops and questions it raises like the nature of eternal life, the question of providence, whether this is a resurrection or a resuscitation, and how Lazarus’ experience foreshadows Jesus’.

There are important teachings and heady concepts in this text, but I want to explore a different aspect of the story today. I want to consider its emotional elements. Rather than ask questions about what we think of various details within the text, I want to ask, “How does this story make us feel?” Being who I am, I may do this in a cognitive way, but I’ll do my best to get out of my comfort zone and focus on the emotions.

This is one of the most emotional and relational stories in scripture, especially as it concerns Jesus, but all the characters are wearing their emotions on their sleeves. At the beginning of the story, the disciples express fear at the prospect of going to Bethany in Judea where their friend Lazarus has been ill. And why shouldn’t they?! Some of the Jewish leaders have just tried to stone Jesus for what they believe to be blasphemy, claiming he is somehow one with God. The disciples aren’t particularly excited about Jesus dying and perhaps them also with him. Jesus says that Lazarus has died already. What good can they do? Only Thomas, whom we wrongly label “doubting,” is willing to go.

But while the disciples express fear, Martha, and later Mary, Lazarus’ sisters, express frustration bordering on anger when Jesus finally arrives. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!” Martha says in exasperation, and Mary later echoes this emotion. Martha goes on to express confidence that Jesus can still help in some way, God will do whatever Jesus asks. And when Jesus says he is the resurrection and the life, Martha says she

believes he is the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world. But she and her sister Mary still feel what they feel — in addition to grief, frustration, because all of this might have been avoided.

When Jesus draws near Lazarus's resting place, he discovers that everyone else shares Mary and Martha's sadness and frustration. There is weeping and wailing, as well as questioning Jesus's timing. It is a raw scene filled with intense emotion and graphic detail. When Jesus asks for a stone to be removed from the entrance to the cave where Lazarus's body lies, Martha notes that there is a stench because he has been dead for four days. It makes sense but still... TMI!

I think of a story my predecessor in another setting told about a communion service when he thought a deacon to whom he was handing a tray of communion cups had the cups but didn't. The tray fell and all the cups broke or fell over and juice went everywhere. Into startled silence, a child in the church exclaimed loudly, "Oooooo!" We have a similar reaction and visceral response to the details of this story in John. Do we have to talk about the stench of the body? Oooooo! The characters in this story are expressing raw emotions.

It is no different for Jesus. It is a difficult scene and Jesus is close to these people, really close. When he first arrives, the text says he is greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. The Greek may express sadness, an unsettled feeling, perhaps even anger. We wonder what would evoke anger, if this is the sense of the text. Probably the forces he must contend with, the harsh realities of life, suffering and death.

Perhaps Jesus feels all these emotions, but one thing is clear. The text says Jesus begins to weep. Whatever he believes about life beyond death, he knows the sadness death brings for people he loves, and thus he too is sad, deeply sad. We might say this one matters to Jesus, this situation and these people matter to him. All situations and people do, but this one with these people really does!

It is a dynamic somewhat like one ministers face. People often note how difficult it must be to lead a funeral service for someone we don't know well or at all. And those funerals present a challenge. But the greater challenge, at least on an emotional level, is leading a service for people we know really

well and love deeply. Personal connections deepen our emotions, as they do for Jesus in this story.

But there is one other emotion that we might say is only implied, left in the empty space of the text — joy. The story ends with Jesus raising Lazarus and many people coming to believe in Jesus. There is no description of joyful shouts or exclamations. Perhaps they are just assumed, or perhaps the joy takes the form of a kind of awe that is almost beyond words. But surely deep down all who have been filled with grief, anger, and frustration are now overjoyed. Lazarus is alive!

There are so many different emotions in this story. No one holds back and keeps a good British stiff upper lip. But how does this story make us feel? What emotions does it stir within us?

Most of us at some point feel a good bit of frustration and anger, as Martha and Mary do. Faith does not guarantee a smooth path without struggle. We know this. And we do place our ultimate trust in God, no matter what happens. But we still wonder at times why good people suffer and die so often, even the best people, while the stinkers seem to live forever and rarely face consequences for their actions. We know God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts, but shouldn't they be better than ours?

Martha and Mary struggle with these feelings and questions. They believe in Jesus, but they struggle because real life and genuine faith involve struggle. Lauren Winner tells a story about a twelve-year-old who told her father, who was also her pastor, she couldn't go forward with her confirmation because she wasn't sure she could believe everything she was supposed to believe forever. He told her that what you promise when you are confirmed is not that you will believe this forever, but that this is the story you will wrestle with forever (as quoted in *The Christian Century*, March 2023, p. 27).” That is wise counsel.

This story reflects our frustration and anger. It also taps into our experience with grief, our feelings of deep sadness. Grief is rarely uncomplicated; this story confirms this reality. But loss always brings sadness on a scale that can be overwhelming all by itself. When I read a story like this, I cannot help but remember an array of personal losses that unsettled my

world. The death of my grandfather when I was ten — he had been a father figure to me when I was young, he taught me to play golf, he took me with him to work at the radio station, cancer ended his life at sixty. The death of my mother when I was twenty-seven — she was forty-eight, a cerebral aneurism took her life, she left unresolved issues in addition to a heritage of love, insight, and advocacy.

The early divorce of my parents, the death of Dana's mother, and so many other losses — I understand this biblical story, it feels genuine to me, and the fact that Jesus feels what I feel is helpful in ways beyond the ability of words to express. A Jesus whose feet never touch the ground is nowhere near as helpful as one who wrestles in the dirt with us, groans from somewhere deep within and cries with us. This latter Jesus gives us permission to feel what we feel and assures us that he understands.

But in addition to feelings of frustration, anger, and sadness, there is another feeling this story evokes — joy. The story does not end with death. It ends with life, miraculous new life. Lazarus will still die. This is just a resuscitation, albeit several days after death, but it foreshadows resurrection, eternal life, hope for something more beyond our sadness. This hope doesn't just relate to "in the sweet by and by;" it begins now, because an awareness of eternity means that this life has enduring value.

I have shared before an insight of Episcopal priest and Jungian analyst Morton Kelsey who said that if this life is all there is, we are insane if we do not grieve bitterly at death. Life is but a sandcastle on a beach, interesting for a time at best, but wiped away completely by one great wave at death. But if this life is not all there is, we have hope for something more and we have reason to believe we might reconnect with loved ones who have preceded us into eternity, but we also realize that this life matters, that nothing is ever lost in the economy of God. That is cause for joy which is where this story about Lazarus leaves us.

A good story, like a good song, like "Out of the Deep," moves us in some way, it evokes strong emotions. This story does, it stirs different emotions, all of which are familiar to us, but it ultimately moves us to gratitude and joy — gratitude for the knowledge that God understands us, and joy at the hope we have for something more.