

“When Jesus is Late”

John 11:1-7, 17-44

Fifth Sunday of Lent, (April 10) 2011

Kyle Childress

You know this story. It’s one of the most beloved stories in the New Testament and we’ve heard it read many times, often at funeral services. We know how the story ends and that’s where the dramatic emphasis is – on the raising of Lazarus, but I want us to pause early in the story. I want to look at where Jesus is on his way and grief-stricken Martha goes out to meet him. She goes out to confront the one person in the world she thought she could depend on. With a sense of betrayal in her voice, she says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (v. 21).

We have to admit, don’t we, that Martha has a point. Jesus has already healed a man who was blind from the day he was born back in John 9 and which we talked about last week. Back in John 5, Jesus has already gone to the pool at Bethesda and found a man paralyzed 38 years, and told him, “Pick up your mat and walk,” and in the power of God the man did just that. Way back in Cana, in John 4, a desperate young father came all the way from Capernaum to seek him. “Sir, please come. Please, it’s my son – I’m losing my son. Please come. Please come now! I’m running out of time.” Jesus said, “Go! Your son will be well,” and that very hour he was.

So, you have to admit, Martha has a point. “Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died” – but he wasn’t there. Martha has a point because Jesus was their friend. We know that Jesus spent time in their home in Bethany.

Bethany, a small village outside of Jerusalem, was about as far from Jerusalem as it is from here to Java Jacks, was where Jesus stayed when he came to Jerusalem. It was in their home where Jesus taught while Martha busily got supper ready and Mary sat on the floor listening to what Jesus had to say. They were friends. Frederick Buechner says that those times when Jesus got tired of being the Messiah, when he needed a break, he went to their house to relax. So when he got the message that Lazarus, his friend, was ill, that Lazarus, whom he loved, was sick, he didn't go. He didn't go. We can understand then the sense of betrayal in Martha's voice.

He didn't go. And it's not as if the problem was Jesus' packed schedule. It's not as if he could look at Martha and say, "You know, Martha, I'm sorry. I would have been there, but I was feeding the 5,000. You know, Martha, nothing would have pleased me more than to be right at Lazarus' side, but I had a previous speaking engagement with the multitudes." John makes it absolutely clear that the reason he did not go was because he never intended to go. The way John puts it is, even though he loved Martha, even though he loved Mary, even though he loved Lazarus, when he got the word that his friend whom he loved was ill and needed him, he decided to stay two more days in the place where he was. He waited until time had run out, and Lazarus was dead.

Lord, if you had been here; but you didn't come, and we ran out of time.

It is a theological sign of a broken and fallen and tragic and suffering world that we are running out of time – all of us. Like a scene from an old movie, the camera focuses on an hour glass and zooms in so we can see that the last few grains of sand are running out. We are running out of time. Down at the end of

every corridor stands death with a leering face, holding up an alarm clock and saying, “I own time. Time belongs to me, and you are running out of time.”

More than once I’ve visited someone in ICU and they’ve said through their oxygen tubes and IV’s and humming, beeping machines, “I wish I had more time.”

This past week I was at both Truett Seminary at Baylor and Brite Divinity School at TCU. Students at both schools are discouraged. Churches still drag their feet over calling and ordaining women clergy. Many churches would rather have an incompetent male pastor than an outstanding female pastor. And the students see churches fighting over having gay and lesbian Christians in their congregations – something Jesus never talks about, while never blinking over the mistreatment of the poor – something Jesus has plenty to say about. One of the alarming results is that students in divinity schools and seminaries are running in the opposite direction of the local church. They want nothing to do with congregations. They want to follow Jesus; they want to be Christian. But they see the church as an obstacle to following Jesus Christ.

One professor said, “It is so sad to see our students so early in their careers running up against injustice in the church. They are so young, and the church is already taking away their future.”

We are running out of time.

We read the news and the reports coming out of Austin and Washington every day. More cuts for public school education which results in laying off teachers. Cuts in higher education coupled with higher tuition costs for students, cuts in mental health funding, cuts in basic funding for programs which help poor

people. Unemployment. Poverty. Yet no new taxes for corporations or the wealthy; no sharing of sacrifice by the wealthiest and most powerful.

According to writer Bill McKibben, last month in the House, the newly empowered GOP majority voted down a resolution stating simply that global warming was real. McKibben says, “They’ve apparently decided to go with their own versions of physics and chemistry.”

McKibben said that this week in the Senate, the biggest environmental groups were reduced to a bare-knuckles fight merely to keep the body from gutting the Clean Air Act, the proudest achievement of the green movement. The outcome is still unclear; even several prominent Democrats are trying to keep the EPA from regulating greenhouse gases.

“And in the White House, the President has instead introduced an energy plan heavy on precisely the carbon fuels driving global warming. He focused on ‘energy independence,’ a theme underscored by his decision to open 750 million tons of Wyoming coal to new mining leases. That’s the equivalent of running 3,000 new power plants for a year.”

We are running out of time.

“Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died; but we ran out of time.”

And it was at that time, when the world felt it had run out of time, that Jesus said, “It is time to go in. This is not about death. This is about the glory of God.” It is not Lazarus who has run out of time; it is death that has run out of time. It is not justice that has run out of time; it is injustice that is running out of time. What I

think that means for us is that, if we are going to be disciples of Jesus Christ we are going to have to throw our wrist watches and our iPhones and our Blackberrys away, because Jesus will not participate in the alienated, atheistic, anxiety-ridden world that does not have God and that believes that hope and life and justice are running out of time. Death and despair, meanness and hatred do not set the agenda. Jesus stands before every tomb and says, “I am the Lord of time. Come out, Lazarus! Come out!”

Theologian Karl Barth once said, “If I give you money, then I give you money. But if I give you my time, I give you me. If I give you my time, I give you all that I am.” God created time, said Barth, and in Jesus Christ “God makes time for you, has time for you, takes time for you, is time for you.” Standing at the end of the corridor is not death holding an alarm clock, saying “I own time.” It is rather Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

This is what baptism really means, you know. It’s moving from a world that is running out of time into a new world in which God gives us time and takes time. In a beautiful baptismal sermon from the fifth century by the old bishop Theodore of Mopsuestia, he told those who were about to be baptized what was going to happen to them. He said, “You will kneel on the floor, and you will face the West, the region of evil and darkness, and you will point your finger at the accuser, and you will say, ‘Satan, I renounce you and all your vanities, and all your angels and all your ministries.’” In other words, “Evil, I don’t have any more time for you.” “Then you will face the East, and you will find that the Bishop is in new clothes which are resplendent and dazzling and light, a symbol of a new world which you are entering. They dazzle because you will shine in that world. They are graceful and delightful for you will be graceful and delightful.” In other words, baptism is not simply joining the church or even changing identities. It is changing time

zones! We are moving from a world that is running out of time to one where hope and justice will never die.

Jesus arrived in Bethany right on time. He was on his schedule, not death's. When he got to the tomb of Lazarus, now dead four days, Jesus, the Lord of the past, present, and future, reached into the future of his resurrection victory and reversed the past of Lazarus' death, thereby displaying the glory of God in the present.

Some years ago, a group of Mennonites, protesting our reliance on nuclear weapons, marched around the outside perimeter of a nuclear missile base. They marched around the base seven times like Joshua and the children of Israel marching around the city of Jericho. And like Joshua, at the end of their seventh trip, they stopped and blew trumpets, except their trumpets were toy trumpets for children. They stood there for a moment and a reporter said, "Well, the walls aren't tumbling down." One of the Mennonites responded, "Oh, but they will. They will."

Those Mennonites were on Jesus' time and not on the clocks of this world.

Jesus shows up with eternal time, eternal life, and those of us who follow him have to learn to tell time differently. When Jesus at last came calling on the little village of Bethany, everyone thought that he was too late. Death had won. But when Lazarus came forth from the tomb of death, with eternal life, the whole world could see that Jesus was right on time.

Amen and amen.