

Sermon – February 22, 2026

Scripture: John 11:1-44

This week, we begin our worship and preaching series on the theme “Dwelling in Dissonance.” What a profound phrase to meditate on for a season of Lent. Dwelling in Dissonance could mean to live in disagreement, to lean into paradox, to hold opposites together, to exist in the tension between grief and hope. This morning, I would like to focus our attention on the dissonance of stillness and change in the story of Lazarus and his miraculous resurrection from the dead.

Psalm 46:10 tells us: “be still and know that I am God.” What does it mean to be still in this passage? One translation of this word is “to let go of” or “to release”. We can think of this kind of spiritual stillness as releasing ourselves from distractions, fear, and stressful striving so that we can truly encounter the presence of God and experience God’s power. There is movement in this stillness – a stillness that is an opening to the movement of God.

We may think of death as the ultimate form of stillness, a final ending – a kind of static state. But there is movement in death just as there is in life. Consider the story of Lazarus. We are told that Lazarus has been dead for four days before Jesus raises him from the dead. Why *four* days?

It was believed by some at that time that the spirit of the dead hovered close to the body for up to *three* days and that it was possible during these three days for the body to come back to life.

There are a number of biblical references to this kind of resuscitation. In 1 Kings 17, the prophet Elijah prays over the just-deceased body of a woman’s son and he is resuscitated. In 2 Kings 4:35 the prophet Elisha prays over the body of a Shunammite’s dead son and his spirit re-enters his body. In 2 Kings 13:21, a man is resuscitated when his corpse comes into contact with Elijah’s dead bones. In the New Testament book of Acts, Peter resuscitates a woman named Tabitha and Paul resuscitates Eutychus.

But Lazarus is raised after four days, not three. He is beyond the point of resuscitation, so his family is having to grapple with the finality of his death. When Jesus brings Lazarus back to life, he performs a miracle, a resurrection – a sign of God’s glory; that God can do things beyond what is thought possible. But this resurrection is also not the end. Lazarus’ resurrection is not permanent. He will die again someday from natural causes and be transformed again in death. In death, there is still change and movement just as there is in life.

I wonder how Lazarus experienced his journey from death to life? I wonder how Mary and Martha experienced this new Lazarus? Was he at first unrecognizable, like Jesus was at first unrecognizable to his friends after he was resurrected? Had Lazarus changed during those four days? Our body certainly continues to change after death, but had he also gone through a spiritual metamorphosis? One can hardly imagine that one would remain the same after such an ordeal.

Lazarus’ sister Martha is alarmed when Jesus tells those present to roll away the stone from Lazarus’ tomb. She says: “But Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there for

four days!” Martha knows that a body naturally decomposes. It does not exist in a static state of permanence.

Lazarus’ other sister Mary reacts differently to his death than Martha. When Martha finds out that Jesus is finally coming, she runs out to meet him with many questions. She doesn’t understand why he didn’t come right away to save Lazarus from death. She seems confused and perhaps disappointed in Jesus’ inaction. Mary, on the other hand, stays at home. After speaking with Jesus, Martha goes back to fetch her sister Mary and bring her to Jesus because Jesus is asking for her. When Jesus sees Mary weeping, he also weeps.

The Greek word for the nature of Jesus’ weeping is different from the one used for Mary’s weeping. The Greek word used for Jesus’ tears is *dakryō*, meaning “to shed tears,” and the word used for Mary’s tears is *klaiō*, meaning “to wail in mourning.”¹ Jesus does not wail like Mary does. Biblical scholar D.A. Carson explains: “Profound grief at such bereavement is natural enough; grief that degenerates to despair, that pours out its loss as if there were no resurrection, is an implicit denial of that resurrection.”² For Mary, in this moment, death appears to be the end. And she is seemingly inconsolable.

Jesus weeps with the mourners from a place of compassion and empathy; a place of solidarity with the raw grief they are suffering. But Jesus weeps knowing the reality that death is not the end. He does not weep without hope. He does not weep in despair. He weeps in love even though he knows that Lazarus will be resurrected. Martha seems to understand this on some level. When Jesus tells Martha that he is the “resurrection and the life” and “the one who believes in me will live even though they die,” he then asks her if she believes this to be true. She responds with “yes, Lord...I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world” (John 11:25-27).

But Martha also misunderstands the nature of resurrection, thinking that Lazarus will be raised on the last day like all other believers. She doesn’t realize that Jesus is about to raise Lazarus in the present moment.

In the story of Lazarus, we see that through God’s divine movement, death is not the end. Death does not stand apart. Death is simply another point in the ever-changing nature of creation.

As I was preparing for this sermon, two images from very different cultures came to mind. And despite their differences, they both engage the dissonance of stillness and change.

¹ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and Johannine Epistles*, 175.

² *The Gospel according to John*, 416.



This first image is of one of Michelangelo's sculptures called *The Atlas* or *Bound* in his series of similar sculptures called "The Prisoners". The character of the titan Atlas is from Greek mythology. Atlas is condemned by the god Zeus to hold up the heavens for all eternity on his large shoulders as a punishment for leading the titans in a war against the Olympic gods.

In this series, Michelangelo used a creative carving process called *non-finito* or "incomplete". The sculptures appear to be unfinished, but this was Michelangelo's intention. His vision was to portray prisoners fighting to liberate themselves from the bonds of the stone, thereby representing "the eternal struggle of human beings to free themselves from their material trappings."³ The figures, like Atlas, are like us. They are not finished.

One of the guides to the Accademia Gallery in Florence, Italy, where these sculptures are housed, explains: "All the unfinished statues at the Accademia reveal Michelangelo's approach [to] carving. Michelangelo believed the sculptor was a tool of God, not creating but simply revealing the powerful figures already contained in the marble."⁴ In other words, Michelangelo sees the statue already emerging from the stone before he even starts to chisel. For Michelangelo, the stone is not still in a static sense, but already moving toward an evolution in form. I believe that this is the way God sees us in all of our potential.



³ <https://www.accademia.org/explore-museum/artworks/michelangelos-prisoners-slaves/>

⁴ *Ibid.*



Here is the second image. It is a Navajo sand painting of Changing Woman on the left and another image of some of the women who create these sand paintings. Changing Woman is one of the spirits of creation and she represents the cyclical nature of fertility and the four seasons. According to Navajo mythology, Changing Woman never dies, but grows old in fall and winter and then becomes young again in spring and summer. She is Mother to all *Diné*, or “people”.

One Navajo healing ceremony takes place over nine nights in winter and is meant to restore harmony within the universe. One of the elements of the ritual is the creation of sand paintings (like this one) which are destroyed when the ceremony ends, signifying the changing nature of reality and the illusion of permanence. I want to share part of the Night Chant prayer that is said during this sacred time:

*Beauty is before me
And beauty is behind me
Above and below me hovers the beautiful
I am surrounded by it
I am immersed in it
In my youth I am aware of it
And in old age I shall walk quietly
The beautiful trail.*

*The mountains, I become part of it...
The herbs, the fir tree, I become part of it.*

*The morning mists, the clouds, the gathering waters,
I become part of it.
The wilderness, the dew drops, the pollen...
I become part of it.*⁵

When we consider that we are not separate from, but a part of creation, death, in a sense ceases to exist. A sperm and an ovum unite and form a different sort of being, which gestates, is born, grows into a child, an adult, an elder, then passes into a mysterious realm, where it is reconnected with the earth and is then reconstituted in another living form. In a way, there is no death. There is only change. Of course, we feel pain as we grasp at our longing for no change, but the grasping is what brings pain. Real pain. I am not trying to diminish this pain, having been through many griefs myself and having borne witness to the griefs of others.

A few nights after my mother died, I had a dream. I dreamed that it was nighttime and that she was floating down a river in the back of a large canoe that was being oared by an old man. Her face was turned to the starry sky and there was a look of wonder in her eyes. This dream has stayed with me and it reminds me that her journey, just like mine, has continued. This brings me comfort and hope and keeps me from wailing in despair, the way Mary wailed after the death of her brother. It is a dream of resurrection, of the endless cycle of life and death that are all part of God's creation.

During Lent, we contemplate the nature of death in all its forms and we allow ourselves to experience grief. We repent from our own sins and for the sins of the world. We pray to return to holiness; to be realigned with God's will for us and to seek God's presence in dark times. In Lent, we are reminded that death and sin have power, but they do not have the last word. Praise be to God.

Amen.

⁵ For the full Night Chant prayer, see: <https://blog.kachinahouse.com/what-is-the-meaning-of-the-navajo-night-chant/>