

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

By the Rev. Dr. Harry Wendt, Founder of Crossways International
(Sola Publishing, Edited Version © 2023 H. Wendt)



Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

John 11:1-45 (46-53)

Year A - Lent 5, Text: John 11:1-45 (46-53)
Year A - Lent 5, Text: John 11:1-45

In the previous chapter, Jesus leaves Jerusalem for safety reasons and goes to the place where John had been baptizing (10:40–42), possibly Bethany Beyond the Jordan (1:29). The day comes when Jesus receives word from Mary and Martha that their brother Lazarus is seriously ill, and Jesus returns to Bethany on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives.

Verses 11:1–4: John does not tell us the story of Mary and Martha in which Mary sits at Jesus' feet while Martha frets in the kitchen (Luke 10:38–42). In Luke, Mary's posture denotes that she is asking Jesus to accept her as a student! Jesus obviously answered, "Yes." John is the only evangelist to tell us of the sickness of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. Naturally, Jesus is called when Lazarus becomes sick. The sisters send for Jesus not merely because He is their friend, but because He has the power to heal. When reacting to the call, Jesus explains to His disciples that the present sickness will not end in death; it has come about as an opportunity for God to show forth His glory so that the Son of Man may also be glorified.

Verses 11:5–10: Jesus does not rush to the bedside of His dear friend, but stays where He is for two days, after which He sets out for Bethany. The disciples remind Jesus of the opposition against Him in Jerusalem. Jesus responds by emphasizing two truths. The first is that the daylight is fleeting. Time is running out! He must go back to Jerusalem for His Father has work for Him to do. Jesus then adds a reminder in which He refers to walking by the light of day. People are safe as long as they are with Him, the Light of the World. But those who walk without His light walk in darkness — in peril.

Verses 11:11–16: Jesus takes His time to get to the scene. He also talks in riddles that make His disciples wonder what is going on. Only Jesus is in command of the situation. The disciples do not understand what Jesus means when He says that Lazarus is asleep. Jesus explains that He has purposely stayed away from

Lazarus until he is dead so that the disciples might see His power and believe in Him. The disciples still do not understand. Thomas, nicknamed "The Twin," shows admirable loyalty and affection. He is prepared to go with Jesus to Jerusalem — even if it means death. Possibly, Thomas suspects that Jesus' death is not far away.

Verses 11:17–27: Lazarus has been buried for four days by the time Jesus reaches Bethany. (It is possible that Lazarus has been in a tomb for only a little over two days, since the Jews counted even part of a day as a full day.) While Jesus has been taking His time to get to His friends' place, other relatives and friends have wasted no time in coming to Mary and Martha to offer comfort. Comforting the grieving was considered a work of piety among the Jews; see Job 2:11. Some might be asking, "Has Jesus no sympathy and understanding for people in sorrow?"

When Jesus promises that Lazarus will live again, Martha sees only half the truth; as a good Jewess, she knows that God will raise the dead on the Final Day of resurrection. Jesus now makes an astounding I Am statement. He Himself is true life, He is the resurrection — and not only because He will finally call the dead out of their graves (see 5:28, 29; 6:40, 44). Faith in Him as the Son of God means that Eternal Life begins here and now (see 5:24; 8:51). Although the believer still must die and be buried, that does not mean that all hope is lost. Rather, dying means entry into eternal life in the fullest and most perfect sense. Only One who has life in himself, the perfect life of God, can offer this kind of life (see 1:4; 5:26; Revelation 1:18).

Before Jesus does anything else, He asks the crucial question, "Do you believe this?" Martha is asked to believe Jesus' words even before He performs His greatest miracle. Like the man whose son was healed (4:50), she must learn that faith in Jesus means trusting in His promises. She stands the test and becomes

one of those who make a great confession to Jesus: He is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Coming One (see 1:9, 15; 3:31; 4:25).

Verses 11:28–32: Mary is the quiet one, sitting at home and grieving for her lost brother. Martha (as in Luke 10:38–42) is the practical, busy person. We sense a tone of reproach in her first words to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Now it’s too late! At least Martha shows some faith. She knows that Jesus could have prevented Lazarus’ death. But even now a glimmer of hope shines through her sad words. Martha’s “if” does not mean that all hope is gone and there is nothing more to be done. When Jesus is present, there is always hope. Martha knows this, and clings to every small shred of hope.

John knows how to tell a good story to keep his readers in suspense. As readers, we know how things will end. However, the tension mounts as we follow the movements of people between Bethany and the place where Jesus is staying. Martha has gone out to get Jesus (v. 20); now she rushes back home to get Mary (v. 28). It is now Mary’s turn to run out to meet Jesus. Her friends follow her, thinking that she is going to her brother’s tomb. Mary repeats her sister’s “if.”

Verse 11:33–37: Jesus does not offer cheap comfort such as, “Cheer up! You’ll soon get over it! This time next year the pain will be gone.” No! He is deeply moved by the tears of Mary and her friends. Even the shortest verse in the Bible, “Jesus wept,” (“began to weep”) contains a message of comfort. He knows and understands human sorrow as we mere mortals stand crying at a graveside. We do not have to try to hide our feelings, or put on a brave front. The onlookers do not understand Jesus’ weeping. His tears are not a sign of hopelessness in the face of death, but of compassion and sorrow over the power of death, which must be broken by the Lord of Life.

Verse 11:38–40: Humanly speaking, everything points to the terrible finality of death. Lazarus has been dead for four days. His body, wrapped in cloth (probably with some preservative ointments between the folds), will by now have begun to decompose. Again, it is the ever-practical Martha who states the obvious. Why open the grave now? What is to be gained by looking at a dead body? Jesus has to remind her of His words to her a little while earlier (Verses 25–26). Has she so quickly lost the faith that she confessed so magnifi-

cantly (v. 27)?

Verses 11:41–44: Jesus talks with His Heavenly Father — not to gain some power that He does not yet possess, but for the benefit of the onlookers. They must be reminded that He is the Son doing the work that the Father sent Him to do. One of the sheep hears the Shepherd’s voice (10:16). The Life calls a dead friend back to life (v. 25). The One who will raise the dead on the Last Day with the command of His voice now raises a man back to physical life in this world; see 5:28. At the command of Jesus, the grave must give up its captives. The miracle has happened: Lazarus comes out still wearing his bandages and probably squinting as his eyes adjust to the sunlight. What a sight!

Concluding Remarks

The story of the raising of Lazarus is not referred to in the Synoptic Gospels; however, note Mark 5:21–24, 35–43 and Luke 7:11–19. There are parallels between John 11 and Luke 16:19–31; in the latter parable/narrative, a man called Lazarus dies and is then asked by a rich man to return to the world to convince his relatives of their need for faith and repentance. In John’s narrative, Lazarus returns to life in this world — and some believe and some do not.

The Pharisees expected the resurrection of the body to take place at the end of the age when the Messiah came (Isaiah 25:8; Daniel 12:2). In raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus declares that the Messianic Age has broken in — with Him. The resurrection is a present fact and reality.

This is the “last straw” for Jewish leaders. It leads to the decision of the Sanhedrin to kill Jesus. Jesus’ gift of life to Lazarus leads to His own death. By the time Jesus is tried by the Romans, the Jewish religious leaders have already made up their minds about Jesus. Although Jesus is seemingly on trial throughout His ministry on earth, as soon as He appears, it is actually humanity that is on trial. The fate of each person depends on his or her answer, and living response, to the question, “Do you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God?” (20:31). Are you devoting your life to following Him in servant discipleship?

In Jesus, the future Final Judgment has moved into the present. To encounter Jesus is to be judged by Him. Jesus’ judgment is the Last Judgment — an ongoing and timeless judgment (3:19).