

Bible Study Guide: Week of 11-01-2021

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

John 11:32-44

³²When 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.”

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” ³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

³²When 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.”

There are an abundance of characters named “Mary” in the gospels. Interestingly, in John’s gospel, Mary the mother of Jesus is never referred to by the name Mary. Instead, she is just called “his mother.” Mary Magdalene comes up in John’s gospel only at the very end—at the cross and, of course, at the empty tomb. This Mary referred to here is Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus. This family from Bethany were evidently well-acquainted with Jesus and the other disciples. Lazarus became ill. Upon learning of his illness, Jesus remained away for two days. He waited for Lazarus to die in order to go and show forth his power by resuscitating him. Like all of the miracles in John’s gospel, this one is a “sign”—it points to who Jesus is and points out why he has come. Jesus is, as he said earlier in chapter 11 “the Resurrection and the life.” Just as his statement, “I am the bread of life” coincided with his feeding of 5,000 people and his statement, “I am the light of the world” coincided with his healing the man born blind, so here his statement, “I am the Resurrection and the life” coincides with his raising of Lazarus. Mary takes on the posture of discipleship, kneeling before Jesus, while her words reveal her anguish and grief upon losing her brother.

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

The NRSV makes it sound as though Jesus was simply sad, but the verbs here carry the connotation of anger and indignation. Jesus was troubled and agitated. It is unclear what provoked this reaction. It could be the lack of understanding or faith of those who were weeping, it could be his compassion for his friends mixed with anger and frustration with the power of death itself.

³⁴He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵Jesus began to weep.

The Jews’ reply to Jesus: “come and see” echoes the call Jesus earlier issued to Andrew and another disciple in John 1 when they asked him where he was staying. Likewise, Philip issued this call to Nathanael in John 1 in response to Philip’s remark, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” And in John 4 the woman at the well tells her whole village to “come and see a man who told me everything I ever did!” referring to Jesus as a prophet. Here, the invitation is reversed and has come full circle: Jesus has shared himself with the world and now the world has invited Jesus to “come and see” death firsthand. This prompts Jesus to weep, perhaps sympathetically with his friends or perhaps foreshadowing his own coming showdown with death on the cross.

³⁶So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” ³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb.

The Jews interpret Jesus’ tears and a loving tribute to his friend Lazarus, yet others cannot help but question what more Jesus could have done to prevent Lazarus’ death. Jesus’ renewed agitation and anger (again translated here as “disturbed”) could indicate his frustration with the lack of faith of those present.

It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, “Take away the stone.”

The description of the tomb mirrors the description of Jesus’ tomb later in the gospel. This event—the raising of Lazarus—foreshadows Jesus’ coming Resurrection. Lazarus was raised, but will presumably die again. Jesus, however, will not be held in by death. He will not need anyone to take away the stone for him, as his rising will surpass the resuscitation of Lazarus.

Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.”

It is interesting that Lazarus is referred two several times here as “the dead man.” The sickening smell of decay would have been very familiar to those living at that time. Some of us know that smell also from times that animals have died. This is an evocative story that invites us to not only “come and see” but also “smell” the power of death, yet the greater power of Jesus. Later in chapter 12 Lazarus and his sisters hold a banquet in Jesus’ honor. Martha, we are told, served. Mary, however, anointed Jesus’ feet with precious and costly perfume. The fragrance filled the house. The beautiful smell of perfume is contrasted with the putrid stench of death. As is so common in John’s gospel, opposites are used to powerful effect: Light vs. Darkness, Day vs. Night, Life vs. Death, and here Stench vs. Fragrance. Lazarus has been restored to his family and friends and God is glorified in this celebration. Yet this act of raising Lazarus, ironically, leads the religious leaders to finally decide to arrest and eliminate Jesus. The life Jesus gives Lazarus leads those in power to seek to kill both Jesus and Lazarus.

⁴⁰Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.”

Jesus’ reply to Martha seems to have very little to do with her statement about Lazarus’ decomposition. Instead, he reassures her. Further, he prays aloud for the sake of the crowd so that they might believe. All of this is being done to reveal who Jesus is and why he has come, yet so many people miss it.

⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth.

Again, Jesus’ tomb is foreshadowed here by the presence of these graveclothes. In Jesus’ tomb, the wrappings are neatly rolled up and folded. Jesus, we know, will be totally unbound by death after his resurrection. Lazarus, meanwhile, has been raised to new life, but will die again. He remains symbolically entangled despite his being restored to life.

Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Jesus invites members of the community—likely the same ones who anointed Lazarus for burial by wrapping him—to unwrap him and let him go. They get to participate in the sign Jesus has performed.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. What times have you echoed the words of Mary aloud or in your heart, “Lord if you had been here, my loved one would not have died”? How do you think Jesus would respond to you?**
- 2. Why do you think Jesus wept and was disturbed in spirit and agitated?**
- 3. In what ways might Jesus invite us to participate in God’s salvation in the same way Jesus invites the crowds to “unbind” Lazarus and “let him go?”**