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Abington Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 130, John 11:1-44

## G & G

It is a great honor to stand before you this day as the candidate recommended to you by Abington's Pastor Nominating Committee. I am one who sees a sermon not just as a chance to chat about whatever is on a preacher's mind, but as an opportunity to explore what God might want to say through scripture as it applies to our context. But what scripture passages would fit this important occasion today? A preacher choosing scripture texts, particularly for an occasion like this, where I hope to make a good first impression, is sort of like choosing an outfit or a venue for a first date. I have typically followed what I understand is a common Abington practice, to select passages on which to preach from the Revised Common Lectionary. When I looked there for the fifth Sunday in Lent, the story of the raising of Lazarus was listed. Oh good, I thought, "This particular Sunday should be a joyous occasion and this passage where someone gets raised from the dead would be so filled with joy that it would be a good if not great passage for this special occasion." But as I looked again at the passage, I was reminded that the reading focuses very little on Lazarus getting raised. It primarily describes the grief process of people who are struggling with a great loss. There is also expressed consternation about Jesus being absent in a time of need and when Jesus finally shows up, he starts crying too. Maybe this passage is not such a great match for this joyous day.

When I was in college, there was a young woman I wanted to ask to go out with me for a first date. I knew she liked theater and my university had a very good drama department, so I asked her to go with me to the play at the campus theater. I was confident it would be a good if not great venue that would readily give us something to talk about afterwards. Well, the play was extremely well acted, but it turned out to be the most depressing play I have ever seen. <sup>1</sup> I had been buoyant about the idea, but it went over like a lead balloon. I can't remember what I wore for that first date, but I felt like I should have had on sack cloth and ashes by the end of the play. Neither one of us felt like saying anything after sitting through that. With that great first impression, a second date never happened.

So perhaps you can understand a reason for anxiety on my part about the scripture passages I would choose for this day. There is a lot of mourning going on through most of the narrative from John. Yet, even so, I found something compelling in its telling. Has there been a time when your faith was challenged by some event, perhaps by a significant loss? Or do you know someone who has gone through a tough time like that? Some of us feel like there are powerful destructive forces at work in the world that have the potential to drive us from God, and from our neighbors, and from our own best selves. How are we to respond when we have such an encounter?

Martha, Mary, and Lazarus were siblings who were friends with Jesus. When Lazarus had gotten quite ill, Martha and Mary had sent word urging Jesus to come. But by the time Jesus got the message and had traveled the distance to Bethany, where they lived, it was too late. Face to face, Jesus encounters Martha, and then her sister, Mary. The sisters each say the exact same thing to Jesus: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” What feelings are behind each woman’s expression? There could have been anger that their friend, the one on whom they relied, had not gotten there more quickly. Certainly, there is a sense of regret and sadness in their words. But there is also an underlying faith expressed in their statement – they believed his presence could have made a life and death difference, which is why there is so much pain in these words. Would their faith survive the pain they felt?

Martha, the sister who went to Jesus first, after expressing her disappointment in the timing of his arrival, talks to him about what she believes, making quite a faith statement, and then she goes to get her sister, so that she could have some time with Jesus as well. When Mary comes to Jesus, she falls at his feet before making the same statement about his absence that Martha had expressed before her. That was all that Mary could articulate before she begins to cry. Our Lord joins her grief with his own tears. Notice, Jesus does not chide the sisters for their honest expressions. They each needed to lament in the presence of one who loved them. We at times have similar needs. After sharing her disappointment and sorrow, Martha is able to make a faith statement with words. Mary would express her faith with her actions, when in the next chapter in John, she falls at Jesus’ feet again, this time in order to anoint them with expensive ointment and

wipe them with her hair. It's as if John wants us to understand that it is o.k., even spiritually healthy to express one's grief and difficulty with what has been experienced as a Godly absence. Honest, even difficult expressions about one's experience and need shared in a caring context, do not undermine faith – they enhance it. And shouldn't a faith community be a place where such things can happen!

After these encounters with each sister, Jesus calls for the stone covering the entrance to the tomb to be rolled back. There is resistance because of the anticipated stench. But Jesus is insistent, and then he calls Lazarus to come forth, showing that even the powers of death can't put a period where God chooses to put a comma.

A pastor friend of mine tells about a tragic death of a young man who left behind a wife and a young daughter. Extended family and friends gathered at the house to express their love and concern. People from the church had brought plenty of food, so all who were there were invited to share supper together. As people were starting to eat, the four-year-old daughter announced loudly that her daddy had told her to always say a blessing before the meal. Things got quiet in a hurry and the little girl folded her hands and started into the blessing she knew. However, with the crowd of people and the strain of the situation, the girl was a little overwhelmed and the "God is great, God is good" prayer that usually flowed from her lips didn't come out quite right. "God is good, God is great..." - she paused, realizing that her prayer wasn't going to rhyme like it normally did, but she wasn't sure what was wrong. The crowd held its breath. She started in again: "God is good, God is great" and she paused once again. Those who were listening wanted to advise her to switch her phrases so the rest of the prayer would rhyme. But before anyone could break the pregnant silence, the little girl continued: "God is good, God is great, I can't remember the rest. Amen." All who were there breathed a collective sigh of relief and then a number of them realized that a simple truth in the midst of a terrible reality had been expressed. <sup>2</sup>

Even at difficult times when there seems to be no rhyme or reason, and when we can't remember anything else, then let us at least try to hold onto the affirmation that God is both G and G, good and great - good in supporting and hurting along with us in our time of loss, using the loving care of a faith community in order to

do so; great in showing that the powers of death are not what has to define or destroy us. Even when the story would appear to be at an end, Jesus can call forth a dead person or a dead faith from a tomb. The One who is the resurrection and the life shows us both the goodness and greatness of God. On this special day, I'm less concerned about the first impression you might have of me than I am about a lasting impression that you get about God – one that starts with a simple prayer and can sustain us even through the most difficult challenges of life and death – God is great, God is good. The truth of those two affirmations held together more than anything else is what makes this and all future days, joyful ones! Thanks be to our great and good God!

<sup>1</sup>Mother Courage and Her Children, written by Bertolt Brecht, is a great play for other purposes than a first date.

<sup>2</sup>From a story by Rev. Joanna Adams, when she was pastor of Morningside Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, GA