We've gotten word that Lazarus has taken ill.

As of this morning, worldwide coronavirus cases stand at 683,932; U.S. cases, 123,898; Dallas County cases, 439. All these are Lazarus to someone. Maybe to two sisters.

John tells us that it was a certain man, Lazarus of Bethany. None of us are uncertain men or women. We’re more than statistics; we are all certain men, certain women. And every Lazarus has sisters who send a message to Jesus something like the one Mary and Martha sent: Lord, he whom you love is ill.

COVID-19 is getting closer to home for all of us. This week we learned about family members of church members who have contracted the virus. I imagine you know someone with the virus that your heart hurts for. Wherever you are right now, say the name.

He is Lazarus. She is Lazarus. Jesus loved Lazarus. Jesus loves Lazarus.

But—and here’s the confusing part—Jesus doesn’t drop everything and come right away. We don’t know why. We don’t know why our prayers for healing don’t get Jesus to rush to our aid right away and take care of everything. He is the Great Physician who heals the sick.

Jesus assures the disciples that Lazarus’s illness will not lead to death but to the glory of God. Well, the glory of God is a human being fully alive, one early church theologian said. So?

After two days of doing God knows what, Jesus announces that it’s time to go see Lazarus, because he has fallen asleep, and Jesus needs to wake him. The disciples don’t get the metaphor of sleep, which stands for death. They aren’t worried. They figure he’ll just wake up on his own. Jesus has to tell them that Lazarus has died, and it will take Jesus to wake him.

Somehow, Jesus knows that Lazarus has died. There’s no word from Bethany about this. He just knows. He knows, I think, because love knows things, and
love is stronger than death. Love binds us to each other in ways that don’t turn away even in the face of death.

“Lazarus” has died. As of this morning, 32,162 globally; 2,231 in the U.S.; and 9 here in Dallas County.

People are getting sick and dying: people we know and love, and people Jesus knows and loves.

In New York right now, where my daughter and her husband and 2-year old son are cooped up in an 800-square-foot apartment, one-third of all the country’s COVID-19 cases are occurring. Some folks are dying alone in hospital rooms. Emergency-room physician Dr. Kamini Doobay told the Associated Press this week: Too many people are dying alone right now. It’s been incredibly painful to see the suffering of family members who I call from the ICU, hearing the tears, crying with them on the phone. It’s one of the most horrific things.¹

I wonder whether John is trying to tell us that nobody really dies alone. Jesus may not be there in the flesh, but he is there.

We’ve been working through the Sarum Prayer during this season of Lent. Our theme has been God Be in Us. We’ve come to the last strophe of that prayer:

- God be in my head and in my understanding.
- God be in my eyes and in my looking.
- God be in my mouth and in my speaking.
- God be in my heart and in my thinking.

Now, to conclude ... or not to ... God be at my end and at my departing.

Jesus is God’s answer to that prayer. He is at our end and at our departing.

The cover art for the order of worship today is a painting of the raising of Lazarus by Vincent van Gogh. It was a variation of a Rembrandt painting of the scene. Van Gogh painted Lazarus with a red beard, probably to indicate how Van Gogh sees himself as Lazarus. The sisters are there in the scene. Van Gogh used two women he knew from Arles as models. In other words, Lazarus is always a certain man. But Jesus is missing in this painting,

just as he seems to be in our experience of dying. Sometimes the sisters are also missing in these moments. Sometimes it’s a doctor or a nurse who is there, playing the part of the sisters as grieving witnesses. These are our heroes and “sheroes” these days. But Lazarus is coming to life nonetheless, Van Gogh wants us to see, because Jesus is there.

When Jesus finally shows up in Bethany, Lazarus has been in the ground for four days. The sisters have been grieving. They are probably fuming, angry at Jesus, if not at God. It’s probably easier to take out their anger at Jesus than at God. It amounts to the same thing.

Mary stays behind at the house. We would expect her to be the one who runs to talk to Jesus. She was the one, John says, who had anointed his feet with perfume and wiped them with her hair. Every man’s dream, don’t you know?! Maybe it was that closeness to him, that intimacy, that made it all the more painful for her that he didn’t come. Maybe she blamed herself. Who knows? We don’t always think clearly in these moments.

Martha runs out to meet Jesus, to give him a piece of her mind, I imagine. I wish we could hear her tone. I’m thinking she’s using her outside voice. She’s got her scolding face on. Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Martha knows and says just what we feel.

Jesus doesn’t scold her back for her lack of faith. He engages her in one of the deepest theological conversations in Scripture. He takes this woman seriously. She can do theology. And don’t we love that, Wilshire?

Minutes after this, Jesus will stand before the tomb of Lazarus, and John will give us the shortest verse in the Bible: Jesus wept. Even though he knew he was about to raise Lazarus, he felt his death and their grief in his innermost self. He shares it, just as he shares all of our griefs and all of our deaths.

But before that, he utters the words to Martha that we say over and over at memorial services: I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me, though they die will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.

Note the present tense Jesus uses there. I AM. That is a
reference to God, the great I AM, the one who always is present with us in all things. Those who die will live. And those who live and believe will never die.

Jesus is the power of resurrection in the face of death at every moment. He is life. And because he lives, death has no power to be our end. Death may be a departing from one thing to the next, from one form of life to the next. But it isn’t an end. Jesus takes the past out of those who have passed. They live in his eternal present.

Many of us have turned to reading during our isolation these days. Maybe you’ve slowed down now enough to add some poetry. I offer this one to you today, and I suggest that you meditate on it afterward to grasp its full sense. The 17th-century preacher and poet John Donne was so obsessed with death that he planned his own memorial statue that still stands in St. Paul’s Cathedral in London where he was dean. Ironically, it’s one of the few things in Old St. Paul’s that survived the Great Fire of London in 1666. The marble figure of Donne is wrapped in a death shroud and standing on a funeral urn, as if he is rising from the ashes.

In his famous sonnet, Donne looks death square in the face with defiant faith:

Debt, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think’st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul’s delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell’st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more;
Debt, thou shalt die.

All this leads us back to Jesus’ question to Martha: Do you believe this? Is your faith greater than your fear?
My pastor friend Charlie Johnson said this just this week: *Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered. No one was there.*

This is our Christian faith, friends. Because God is in us, in life and even in death, our end is only a departure, a transition from life to life. Amen.