

Just yesterday, I started reading the new book by Thomas Friedman, “Thank You for Being Late.” It’s far too soon to tell you what I think about it, but I can say I’ve appreciated some of what I’ve read by Friedman before—*The World is Flat; the Lexus and the Olive Tree; Hot, Flat, and Crowded, That Used to Be Us*. But I was curious about the title, and intrigued by his explanation in the introduction of where the title comes from.

Turns out that Mr. Friedman, like many of us in this age of multitasking, double-booking, and just plain busy-ness, has long been in the habit of scheduling dinner meetings, lunch meetings and increasingly breakfast meetings in order to do interviews, conduct background research, pitch ideas, what have you. It’s his way to pack more and more into a day, he says, and a way to be sure that he’s not “wasting breakfast by eating alone.” With traffic being both unpredictable and complicated in Washington, DC, though, there are times when his breakfast guests arrive ten, fifteen, twenty, even thirty minutes late, invariably flustered and apologetic. What Friedman has come to appreciate, however, is that at these unplanned times—these times of waiting—he ended up with undedicated time for himself. He was able to use those brief periods to think more deeply about some ideas he had been considering, to observe people and situations in the world around him, or just to quiet himself a bit, ahead of his usually busy days. He came to appreciate these unplanned pauses, these spontaneous mini-Sabbaths so much that began replying to his guests apologies with these sincere words: “thank you for being late.”

No one seems to be saying “Thank you for being late” to Jesus in today’s gospel do they? Quite the opposite, in fact. Both of Lazarus’ sisters, Mary and Martha, offer instead these words to Jesus: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” The reason Jesus does not drop everything and go be with this person, with this family he clearly is close to doesn’t make sense on a certain level to either Jesus’s disciples, to the crowd of mourners gathered at the tomb, or maybe even to us. Whatever his motives, Jesus’ delay in getting to Bethany intensifies the pain of Martha and Mary, both of whom begin their interactions with him by sharing their distress and perhaps even

accusation using the exact same words: “Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Still, having heard the whole story told out loud, we know already what they do not: That Jesus insists that Lazarus' illness is “not an illness unto death”—all earthly evidence to the contrary, and that his illness, even his death has happened “for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it,” whatever that might mean. The rest of the story is, among other things, a study in paradox. Martha is upset that Jesus was not there to prevent Lazarus' death, yet still believes that God will do whatever Jesus may ask of God. Mary is equally, if not more accusing as she offers her identical quote to Jesus without the confident caveats Martha does—still she falls at his feet to worship Jesus. Still she addresses him teacher. Still, she follows him to the tomb, watching, waiting to see what he might do next.

Embedded in this story, of course, is one of Jesus' famous “I am” lines found in the gospels, especially the gospel of John. When Martha insists that Lazarus would not have died had Jesus not arrived so late, Jesus tell her that he will rise again. Of course he'll rise again, says Martha, as will we all, on the last day, when all the dead are resurrected. To which Jesus replies “I am the Resurrection and the Life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

Friends, I know we still have a week of Lent left—not to mention all of Holy Week. And I know that we've been gathering around this theme of “Unfinished”—stressing that the work of God is unfinished, that the journey of Lent is unfinished, the stories of our lives of faith are unfinished. I know that this unfinished Lent continues right up through next Friday—Good Friday—when we hear again the words spoken by Jesus: It is Finished.

Still, there is enough foreshadowing on our gospel story today, enough hints about where this unfinished story is heading that I'm going to risk giving away the ending here. Because in this story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, we see the same God doing the same work God did in raising Jesus from the dead, by the power of the holy spirit.

Here's the unfinished Lenten spoiler alert: our God is a God of resurrection and new life. The God of Lazarus is a God of resurrection and new life. The God of Jesus is a God of resurrection and new life. The God we follow when we follow Jesus is a God of resurrection and new life. Can you see it?

The one who tells the mourners to take away the stone, will soon have the stone rolled away for him. Can you see it? The one who calls, "Lazarus, come out!" will soon come out himself, appearing to Mary and the other women, appearing to the Eleven in the upper room, appearing to other followers on the road to Emmaus and the Road to Damascus. Can you see it? Jesus who tells them to unbind the dead man now risen and let him go, will soon also be the once-dead, now risen, no longer bound to distant years in Palestine, but free to be present in all times and all places, free to go to the ends of the earth, to continue God's work using the new hands, the new feet of Christ's body, the church.

The God we follow when is a God of resurrection and new life. Can you see it? When in the midst of a church-wide narrative of decline, decay, and death we see new faces from diverse backgrounds joining together to sing God's praise, to care for one another, to deepen their own faith and to pass it on to future generations, that is the power of the resurrection. When dozens of men of all ages, backgrounds, vocations, outlooks and abilities go off for a retreat for the weekend—when there's so many different things they could be doing instead—that is the power of the resurrection. When people are motivated by the gospel to go the extra mile and give sacrificially so that kids have enough to eat even when school isn't in session, that is the power of the resurrection. When a dear friend dies suddenly of lung cancer, but you know that the project he has worked on for more than a decade will continue because Pulaar-speakers need the whole Bible available, that is the power of the resurrection. When resurrection is not just a boring theological concept, but real tangible signs of new life among us that is the power of the resurrection.

As Professor Karoline Lewis reminds us, the power of the resurrection is the heart of the story of Lazarus. Resurrection is not just a confession. Resurrection is not a theory.

Resurrection is not some sort of ambiguous promise. No, resurrection is real. Resurrection is now. Resurrection is at the heart of our relationship with God.*

The God we follow is a God of resurrection and new life. And God's work of raising the dead and bringing new life is unfinished, and we get to play a role in it, get to enter into God's resurrection mission. So come on out. Unbind yourself—or let someone help unbind you. God is not finished with us yet. There's new life to be had. Thanks be to God. Amen.

*Karoline Lewis, "Resurrection Now," in "Dear Working Preacher" for April 2, 2017, in www.workingpreacher.org, accessed April 1, 2017.