

**How Can This Be?**  
**Northminster Presbyterian Church**  
**February 18, 2018**  
**First Sunday in Lent**  
**Rev. Michael D. Kirby**

(Read Scripture: John 11:1-44)

Yet again, this was not the sermon I had planned for this text. When designing Lenten worship a few weeks ago, my intention had been to concentrate on how strange it must have been for Lazarus to awaken in a world where he knew he was loved so much that his friend, this Jesus, this Messiah, would conquer death at least for a time, just for him.

How would he see the world knowing that every moment he had was a gift from Jesus, knowing it concretely and, hopefully, joyfully? I then planned to invite us to consider that what Jesus does for Lazarus, what he does for us as well — perhaps not bringing us back physically to life in this way in this world, but granting us new life — new and eternal hope that love and grace do eventually conquer sin and death.

And then Wednesday happened.

On Thursday morning when I read the text again, all I could see, practically screaming off the page, were those two repeated lines, once from Martha and once from Mary: “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Taken in context, Martha’s statement appears to be one based in confidence. If you had been here, he would not have died and you can still do something about it. But Mary’s statement has just the tinge of accusation in it, spoken through her tears. If you had done something, this would not have happened.

Mary’s was the one that resonated this week because in it I could hear the angry, heart-broken, shattered tears and bitter words of Lori Alhadeff, mother of beautiful Alyssa whose life was one of 17 taken by semiautomatic weapon fire inside the Marjory Douglas Stoneman High School earlier on Wednesday. “You say, what can you do?” she cried, “You can stop the guns from getting into these children’s hands....What can you do? You can do a lot...This is not fair to our families...that our children go to school and have to get killed.”

Mrs. Alhadeff’s cries were all the more anguished because, like in Lazarus’ day, her tradition — Alyssa was one of a handful of victims who were Jewish — called for her beloved daughter to be buried within 24 hours. So she had only moments to begin grieving before she had to prepare to bury this one she loved so much.

In this mother’s cries, we, American society, hear the echoes of Mary’s tearful cries, “if you had been here ...if God had done something....if WE had done something....Alyssa would still be alive today...”

In the roughly 14 years since the Federal Assault Weapons ban expired, weapons it would have made illegal were used in the Red Lake Reservation shootings in 2005, the Geneva County massacre in 2009, the Sandy Hook Elementary attack and the Aurora movie theatre attack (both in 2012); the San Bernardino attacks in 2015, the Orlando Pulse Nightclub attack in 2016, the Sutherland Springs church shooting and the horrific Las Vegas attack last year. In most of those shootings the guns were purchased legally. In most of those shootings children or teens were among those shot or murdered. And we, as a nation, did virtually nothing to prevent the next attack.

The most sobering statistic I heard this week came from The World Health Organization as published in the *American Journal of Medicine*: Of high income nations, 91 percent of children younger than 15 who were killed by bullets in the last decade lived in the United States — 91 percent.

If we had been here — he, she, they — would not have died. If we had done something, demanded something, they would not have died. We don't know it to be true, just as Mary and Martha did not know it to be true, but we can be assured as they were that Jesus could have made a difference. And since he ultimately did and so perhaps could have we.

In the last 72 hours there have been calls for new laws; there have been calls to not talk about new laws until a proper mourning time has passed; there have been calls repeating over and over that a change in laws would not have made a difference; there have been countless offerings of thoughts and prayers for victims and families, colleagues and friends.

It's a fact that overall, deaths by mass shootings are dramatically higher since the Assault Weapons Ban expired, but it's not the individual law that concerns me today. It's what our inaction represents. A sign appeared yesterday morning on the front of an Anglican church in Australia — not a radical church; just your average urban Anglican parish church. It had on it one question: "When will they love their kids more than their guns?" That's not a political question. That's a moral, ethical, theological question.

Other religious leaders of the world have been making a lot of references to Molech worship this week as referenced in the Book of Leviticus. Molech was the God of the Amorites, a nearby culture to Ancient Israel. The people worshipped a God of forged metal, a God that demanded child sacrifice.

Have we become a nation that worships a God of forged metal, a god that has yet again, demanded child sacrifice that we are willing to tolerate?

As a pastor, as an uncle, as a human being, I'm past the constitutional arguments. I'm past the arguments where the perfect is made the enemy of the good. I'm also certain we cannot let our guilt and shame at being complicit freeze us into silence and inaction. I'm mired now in the conviction that the Bible itself is holding up our unfaithfulness before us, perhaps as it has not since the Holy Spirit gave us new eyes to see how we had twisted ourselves and scripture into knots to justify slavery and the subjugation of women. And this is not just because it is Lent, the Spirit is now demanding repentance, a change of direction.

So how do we respond to this cry: if we had been there — with the force of our convictions, with the will to change practices and laws and procedures — some or all of these young people and these three teachers would they still be alive?

What does Jesus do when he has to confront the reality of the pain his delay in returning has caused? Even though John tells us that Jesus knew Lazarus was dead and knew he could do something about it, when confronted with the reality of it all — the pain of it all, the loss of it all — Jesus weeps.

And so we weep. And that is faithful. But Jesus does not stop there. He defies death in a way we know we cannot. He defies death. He speaks a word of life and confident hope into a place of death and decay: LAZARUS, COME OUT! And there is new life, new hope.

Jesus doesn't let his tears have the final say — or Mary's tears or Martha's. He takes action, life-giving, life-affirming action. And the result is that Lazarus, as I said before, now sees the world in a new way. Now he simply must see the world differently because of what he has been through.

What if Lazarus is our commitment to life and peace and hope for the children of this land? What if Lazarus is the concrete action that must accompany the promises we made today on behalf of Zola and all the children before her. What actions can we take? What life-affirming, life-giving actions can we take in the face of death and so much opposition?

Ask Glennon Doyle Melton; ask her son's elementary school teacher. Melton is the author of the blog Momastery.com and at least one, maybe more, books. Her son, Chase, is in elementary school, and a few weeks ago, Melton went to his teacher for help. She wanted to help her son do his homework but she didn't understand their new way of doing math. So the teacher worked with her on that for a while. And then, as a parent and a teacher often would, they began talking about the challenges of teaching today and the sacred trust it represents and how they both hope the schools are helping to build "communities made up of individuals who are kind and brave above all."

Melton then notes the teacher told her something she does every week: "Every Friday afternoon, she asks her students to take out a piece of paper and write down the names of four children with whom they'd like to sit the following week. The children know that these requests may or may not be honored. She also asks the students to nominate one student who they believe has been an exceptional classroom citizen that week. All ballots are privately submitted to her, and every Friday after the students go home, she takes out those slips and studies them — looking for patterns. In her words: "Who is not getting requested by anyone?"

Who cannot think of anyone to request? Who never gets noticed enough to be nominated? Who had a million friends last week and zero this week?"

It seems this teacher is looking for lonely children, those struggling to connect. And then she works to discover that child's gifts, finds ways of connecting them and building emotional resilience and community, targeting children for special attention to develop

the skills they need to bring their gifts to the fore, to create relationships and vulnerability and safe spaces that to lead to relationships and a sense of belonging that some are not getting at home.

Chase's teacher is speaking a word of hope, a word of life into the echo chamber of loneliness and separation that helped give birth to that sad, broken young man who destroyed so many lives...

How long has she been doing this, Melton asked. "Ever since Columbine," the teacher responded, since 1999. Every single Friday afternoon. No one ever said our way forward would be easy or quick.

I'm not suggesting the solution to this week's tragedy is making teachers do what Chase's teacher is doing. I'm reminding us that there is hope, that just as Christ arrives in the midst of the suffering in Bethany, and surely has arrived in the midst of the families of Parkland — weeping and comforting — the Spirit is inspiring all kinds of people right now — students, teachers, educators, legislators, entire communities — to beat back the death-dealing Molechs of our day wherever they are coming from. And we can follow Christ into the midst of it all; indeed, mustn't we?

No Greater Love is our Lenten theme. It reminds us that Jesus said, "There is no greater love than one who is willing to lay down one's life for one's friends." Three teachers did that this week.

Just a few weeks from now we will rehearse yet again how Jesus did it once and for all. He laid down his life and was raised so that we might know that death will not have the final say, so that we might know and live confidently that the death-dealing powers of the world are not more powerful than our God-given love, our God-given sense of community and communal responsibility.

How can you? How can I use the lives we have been given — the one good, not great, and loving life with which God has gifted each of us. How can we be the voice — the hands, the feet, the love, the action, the political will, the unstoppable force of parental devotion — that calls forth Lazarus: Come out, that calls our hope and our children's hope for the world to be: Come out into the light of our love and determination.

It's not something that will happen overnight. Only Jesus makes miracles in a moment. But like Chase's teacher, like Martha coaxing Jesus into action, we can all do our part — yes, in sadness but also in love and hope. So that we can all see every child, every life, every day with the eyes of the revived Lazarus and cherish them as precious and holy and a reason for joy.

May God make it so and may love rain down. Amen.