

“The Breath of Life or Come Die with Me!”

Psalm 130, John 11: 1-45

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There is so much going on in this story one hardly knows where to begin. It is more than a miracle story. It is more than an “I Am” story. It is more than a sign story. It is more than a foretaste to what is about to happen to Jesus. It is all these things in 45 verses and so much more. Imbedded in this passage are the memorable and comforting words, “I am the resurrection and the life; they who believe in me, though they die, yet shall they live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.” (John 11: 25-26) Who among us has not clung to these words during some time of trial? In the midst of our pain or confusion it is comforting to remember that whatever challenges we face, these things will not destroy us. Jesus tells us he came to conquer death in ways we could not imagine. Jesus came to bring peace to our world, a peace we can never fully comprehend. When evil threatens to undo us and we lose both our hope and faith, we recall this promise: “I am the resurrection and the life...” When we find ourselves in a dark place, we hear the promise that brought Lazarus back to life, the promise that will make a way for us out of our grief or loneliness or troubling situation.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is one of several sign stories in John’s gospel. “A sign story consists of a miraculous act of Jesus usually surrounded or followed by a theological discussion of its meaning.”¹ John offers many such stories; Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana, healing a crippled person at the pool, feeding the multitudes, giving sight to a man born blind and raising Lazarus. Sign stories have two distinct features. First, Jesus acts according to his own time and not according to external pressures. Mary and Martha send for Jesus when they realize their brother is critically ill. Jesus does not come immediately as they had hoped. By the time he arrives, Lazarus is not only dead, but has been dead for four days. This causes great pain and anguish for his sisters and friends. If Jesus were such a friend, why did he not respond more quickly? The sisters insist that if Jesus had come sooner their brother would not have died. Jesus seems unconcerned because despite his delay, he knows that Lazarus is about to come back to them, as alive as he has always been.

Second, a sign story reveals something about Jesus. John uses these stories to help us understand why Jesus came into the world and what impact his ministry may have on his followers. For sign stories to function this way, they must operate on two levels. Fred Craddock says, “on one level Jesus heals a cripple, opens the eyes of the blind and raises the dead, but on another level he reveals a truth about life eternal which God makes available in Jesus Christ.” Therefore, there is always something going on beyond the obvious, just below the surface that helps us understand God and Jesus’ ministry more deeply.

¹ Fred B. Craddock, “The Twofold Death and Resurrection,” *Christian Century*, March 21-28, p. 288.

Many aspects of this story confound us. It is not to be taken literally. It is a teaching tool. This story records more than a family crisis in Bethany. It also hints to the crisis that troubles our world even today. It is more than the story of a community's grief over the death of a beloved friend, but also a reminder that God is in the midst of all the pain and suffering we face. God in Jesus Christ weeps with us, is present and alive to our pain, willing to experience it with us even as he provides the hope that will heal us. Jesus not only has the power to bring life to this his friend but life to all those who believe. "I am the resurrection and the life; they who believe in me, though they die, yet shall they live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." On one level the story is about the death and resurrection of Lazarus, but on another it is about the impending death and resurrection of Jesus. Resurrection is not about bringing life after death, but life out of death. Death does not have the final answer. Resurrection is not something we must wait to experience. There are resurrection moments throughout our lives.

Fred Craddock believes that in this story Jesus experiences a Gethsemane moment, because he knows that calling Lazarus out of the tomb means that he must then enter it. Jesus knows there is no other way because only by doing so can he become the resurrection and the life of the world. We hear shades of the Holy Week story in this story; Jesus is troubled and weeping; this tomb is not far from Jerusalem, the tomb is a cave with a large stone covering the opening; the stone is rolled away; Jesus cries out in a loud voice; the grave cloth is left at the tomb. This is a foretaste of what is to come.

Jesus warns his disciples, "Prepare yourselves." He knows that by raising his friend Lazarus he has signed his own death warrant. The authorities will tolerate no more. Shortly after the story spreads of this miracle, they call for Jesus. They will use this action and many others to condemn him and set in motion the process that leads to his crucifixion. Never the less, the raising of Lazarus is part of the plan and Jesus does not avoid what is to come.

What I love most is the ending of the story. Jesus brings Lazarus back to life, but this new life can not begin until he lets go of the stuff that held him to his past. The cloth that binds Lazarus is part of his past. Jesus tells Lazarus to "come out" of the tomb. In utter amazement, Lazarus comes out to greet the crowd. With the community's help, Lazarus can now begin his new life. Now not only his family but the entire community participate in this life giving ritual.

This is how it is for many of us. There may come a moment in our lives or the life of someone we love where we succumb to something that takes away life as we have known it; an addiction, a constant worry, a chronic illness, or some abusive behavior. Perhaps only those closest to us know the depth of our pain. However, when new life comes, when we shed the burden that has led to our spiritual or emotional death and return to the land of the living as Lazarus did, everyone who loves us participates. Reconciliation and healing is a communal event. We don't always experience it this way because we are reluctant to allow others into our pain. We don't want to burden them. We are ashamed to let people see us suffer. That martyr complex kicks in quickly and deeply.

The preacher Sarah Dylan says, “after we have become convinced that all is lost, when we are ready to concede to death and are seeking only to contain the damage and bury it, Jesus demonstrates that there is no loss, no death, no tragedy, no depth, no power in heaven or on earth or under the earth that can place a person, a situation, or a world beyond God’s redemption, beyond the reach of infinite love and abundant life.” There is no tomb strong enough to contain the shame or guilt or pain or suffering if resurrection power is at work. If we are truly the body of Christ, we walk with each other through the valleys of grief. We listen to each other when tough decisions have to be made. We hold each other when the shock and pain of some of our decisions break us. We need each other. Mary and Martha needed the larger community to help them make sense of their tragedy. Jesus taught them that in order to make sense of their faith, they would need more than each other. They would need the company of fellow believers, those whom they knew and would never know, who had been similarly touched by Christ’s resurrection power.

Jesus promises life that really is life, but in order to have it, we need to die with him. That is why we are here; to help one another make sense of the mysteries and wonders of our faith. Then, even if we can make no sense of it, perhaps there is someone who will stand with us in the mystery. I can not promise when or if enlightenment will come. However, when we steep ourselves in the stories, when we have the courage to question, to weep, to get angry or simply to sit in the silence, we will know what God would have us know. These revelations will likely astonish us and lead to our own professions of faith. As we complete our Lenten journey may God continue to amaze us by what we see and hear and experience? May it be so! Amen