

IT'S NOT EASTER YET

The story of the raising of Lazarus is the sixth of seven signs John gives to prove that Jesus is the Messiah and that through faith in him believers receive new life. Hence, the telling of this miracle leads directly to the climax of the gospel story and the greatest sign of all – the resurrection. Throughout the gospel, John's purpose has been to show that in all that Jesus of Nazareth said and did God was fully present, actively revealing the redemptive power of God's love.

As this story proceeds, Martha gradually becomes aware and believes. That is the significance of the exchange between Martha and Jesus resulting in Martha's confession of faith and another of the "I AM..." proclamations found only in John's gospel. Yet even Martha – like so many of us – experiences a moment of real doubt when Jesus orders the tomb to be opened saying, *already there is a stench...*

Just about everywhere you look in John 11 there is either death or the expectation of death – it lingers in the air. It starts when Mary is identified as the same person who poured perfume on Jesus' feet. Despite the past tense of the verb "poured", that event has actually not happened yet in John's gospel – it is still coming up in the next chapter. But in that next chapter Jesus will describe Mary's anointing of him as a kind of pre-burial embalming of his body. So by highlighting that act of Mary in today's text, John begins this eleventh chapter with a hint of death.

That deathly odor becomes more intense when Jesus predicts that in the long run, Lazarus' sickness would not leave him dead. Still more whiffs of death crop up when, after hearing Jesus' suggestion that they return to Judea, the disciples remind him that the people over there had tried to stone Jesus to death the last time he was in town. It begs the question "Is it so smart to go back?" Death intrudes again when Jesus plainly lets the disciples know that Lazarus is indeed dead. Once Jesus begins to travel to Bethany, the disciples conclude that Lazarus isn't the only one who is going to die that week – Thomas at least is so sure death awaits all of them that he invites the disciples to go and die with Jesus.

The rest of the chapter is even more obviously shrouded in death. But before the chapter is finished, there is still more death talk as the Sanhedrin plots to kill Jesus. Even after Lazarus is raised, the specter of death does not fade from the scene. Death hangs in the air like a toxic cloud of smoke from a chemical factory. There is no escaping its presence.

There is no escaping death. We all know that the natural world continues with or without us and that in the scheme of things we are on this earth for a mere moment. We know that we need to prepare for our death – that we will die – but we don't really believe it. We know our own death is certain and when a loved one is suffering or in declining health we know death is coming soon. Even so, in many ways we don't really believe it. Instead we stand together, weeping with Jesus and Martha and all the others in Bethany, boldly saying: *Lord, if only you had been here...* and: *Yes, Lord, I believe...*

If Jesus had *been there* and prevented the death of Lazarus it would have been merely a rescue from death instead of a triumph over it – a resuscitation instead of a resurrection. By

means of this miracle – this sign – John is telling his own first century community – telling us that because Jesus is fully human and fully divine, life and death are his gifts to give.

Perhaps story of the raising of Lazarus is intentionally placed on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, so that we might anticipate what lies ahead and be given strength and hope for the next part of the journey. Just as John would have us believe in another kind of water – living water – and a different way of seeing that challenges us to bear witness, so now he would have us comprehend another kind of life. In this text John dares to assert that there is a greater marvel than coming back from the dead. It is abundant life – resurrected life that you and I are called to live today.

When did you last echo the words of Martha and Mary?

If only I had listened to his advice...
If only I hadn't stayed up so late last night...
If only we'd seen the doctor sooner...
If only she had called sooner...
If only I had been there...

You say, "If only..." and know that sickening sense of wanting to turn the clock back – to change the past – to interfere with the rhythm of life. It is a wistful dream. It is a kind of nostalgia – not for the past that **was** but for the future that might have been, *if only* the past had just been a little bit different. All of that and more is in the words that Martha speaks to Jesus – If only you had been here I know you could have cured my brother. If only you could have traveled faster, perhaps you would have been here in time. ***If only...***

Jesus' reply to Martha and the conversation they have is interesting. Instead of looking at the past and dreaming about what might have been – at what now cannot be – Jesus invites her to look to the future. And she says that she knows her brother will rise in that future – someday – in the great by and by. Then, he asks Martha to imagine that the future is suddenly brought into the here and now – he wants her to see the future burst in upon the present. The new creation, and with it the resurrection, is now! It isn't just doctrine. It isn't just a future fact. It is a person – a person standing right in front of Martha. Jesus brings God's future into the present moment – into all the mess and muddle of the world we know – and announces, *I AM the resurrection and the life.*

There is no doubt that we live and move and have our being in an appointed pattern too vast and entangled for us to understand or control, but in that mystery we see God who infuses everything with divine love. There is no doubt that Lazarus died – that those we love have died – that we will die – but we are called and encouraged to make a huge leap of trust and hope – to say with confidence that *Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in Jesus, though they die, will live.*

We announce in the face of death that life in Christ is not futile, life lived in the knowledge of God's infinite love is not meaningless. When the evidence of death is as clear as day, we are compelled to disbelieve it because we choose, with Martha, to believe in Jesus, the Christ, who tells us that those who believe will live.

When John speaks about life he uses more specific words that differentiate between different types of life. He uses the word *bios* when talking about the outer physical manifestation of life which is our physical bodies. Then he has another word, *zoe*, which is the living principle of life and is used for the inward mystical sense with reference to the spiritual life. *Zoe* is

what one of my theology professors referred to as *abundant life*. An entity that has *bios* will certainly die, but John tells us that an entity that has *zoe* – *abundant life* – is one that is infused with and participates in eternal life.

Zoe doesn't begin at physical death but is the abundant life we can begin to participate in here and now. It is the life that Christ infuses into us, the one we experience when we are born in the spirit. In much the same way death doesn't only happen when *bios* – the physical self – dies but we can be dying on the inside a little bit every day. In any given moment we are moving either toward abundant life or toward spiritual death.

Theologian John Dominic Crossan has commented on this text that he doesn't think any one, anywhere, at any time brings dead people back to life. But he sees the process of resurrection in the life of this text. Jesus brought **life out of death** for people all over Galilee. They would not have described it as a heavenly future, but an earthly present.

Jesus says, "I AM right now resurrection – I AM abundant life – whoever lives and believes in me will never die." When we live in Christ we abide within the embrace of Christ and there is no death if one is contained in the reality of Christ. It doesn't mean that the physical body does not die, but it does mean that if we participate in abundant life offered through Jesus we are born into a new life in the present – today.

It is not Easter yet, but it won't be long now. The only problem is that we have to walk through a graveyard to get there. Those who do not have the stomach for it will stay home from Palm Sunday through Holy Week, showing up just in time for the fanfare and *alleluias* on Easter morning. The rest of us will hang on to each other as we slip past the tombs during Maundy Thursday communion and hear the cry, "Crucify" at the Good Friday service – telling every resurrection story we can think of.

This text is a kind of rehearsal for what lies ahead; in which Jesus does for his friend what God will do for him. It is his and our assurance that there is a power loose in the universe that is stronger than death, stronger even than our fear of death, which is able to call us out of our stinking tombs into the fullness and sweet mystery of life.

Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief, because I do not want to die. I want a God who will cut my losses and cushion my failures, a God who will grant me a life free from pain. I want a God who will rescue me from death, who will delete it from the human experience and find another way to operate.

What I have – what all of us have – instead is a God who resurrects us from the dead, putting an end to it by working through it instead of around it – creating life in the midst of grief – love in the midst of loss – faith in the midst of despair – resurrecting us from our big and little deaths, showing us by his example that the only road to Easter morning runs smack through Good Friday.

The story of the life of a Christian is not a story about life after death. Our stories are about life **coming out of** death. Not about life after death but about life **and** death. God has woven resurrection into our daily lives so we can learn the shape of it and perhaps learn to trust the strength of it. We can live resurrected lives each day as God breathes and these dry bones are once again given the courage to live. **Amen.**