

## Resurrection and Life

John 11:1-45

This reading is commonly referred to as "the raising of Lazarus." It is a story about Lazarus, whom Jesus loved—his illness, death, burial and decay, and emergence from his tomb, upon being recalled from death to life, with burial wrappings still dangling around him. Even so, its focus is not so much Lazarus the individual as it is wondrous deliverance from death to life itself, the one who brings it about, and responses of others to it.

All three are the emphases of the Fourth Gospel. All four Gospels are written from a vantage point of a post-Easter faith, and John's writings explain that faith through the ministry of Jesus and points to the fact that his divine attributes show that Christ is "one" with God.

Many of us ask: "Did it really happen?" We are not the first or the last to debate miracles. John's account is the only report of the raising of Lazarus. It is a prefiguration of the death and resurrection of Jesus and is understood as indicative of workings of God's power. The raising of Lazarus is in John's reckoning the climax of the series of signs Jesus performs. It extends the manifestations of the presence and power of God he exhibited to that of supremacy over death itself. Such signs are marvels indeed, displayed for eyewitness viewing, and are mighty attestations of God's glory, and Jesus' glory as well. For John, this points to Jesus' being "lifted up" on the cross and from death to life, in oneness with God.

The raising of Lazarus *signifies* that God's promises are here and now, already, being realized amid and despite the ordinariness of the course of life, which includes illnesses, deaths, and burials like those of Lazarus. This and the other signs point to Jesus, the sign-maker, who in turn by his attitude

of prayer points to God. His life-giving action is not dependent on human faith, whether that of Mary, Martha, Lazarus, or the onlookers, but calls that faith forth. Lazarus came out of the tomb at Jesus' word, and "many" of those who saw believed.

Before Jesus raised Lazarus we listen in on Jesus' conversation with Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life" (v. 25). Then he talked about the character of Martha's faith, and Mary's. Each was already a believer, and yet each, independent of the other, told Jesus that had he been there, Lazarus would not have died. The others at the scene said the same thing shortly afterward. The record, earlier on, that Jesus deliberately delayed his response to the sisters' call gave such comments validity. Those who live and believe in the one who is the resurrection and the life shall never die. This life is not a matter of belief in a "general resurrection" to come, but, as Martha's confession tells, a personalized faith: "You are the Christ, the Son of God" (v. 27). Then the raising of Lazarus came about, in the end time that is already present. **James O. Duke**

For us, the tension between the hope of resurrection and the finality of death is clear during this season of intense personal and congregation reflection. Amid painful circumstance and death-dealing social realities, we yearn for resurrection and the *unbinding* that releases us to dream beyond the boundaries and experience life anew. To dream beyond the boundaries is to imagine a world in which wholeness, well-being, health, and prosperity are normative expressions of human existence and to partner with the God of life in making that dream a reality. It is to recognize that our world is not as it should be, while rejecting assertions that the socioreligious strictures that prevent persons from experiencing God's presence in their lives are resistant to change. Our narrative, on this Fifth Sunday in Lent, invites us to consider

the possibility of resurrection in our lives and communities as we deeply need God's presence in the nowness of our existence.

One of the greatest hindrances to imagining possibilities is perceptual distortion. Obstacles appear larger and more ominous than they are, keeping us preoccupied with trying to avoid danger rather than discerning alternatives. This is evident in today's lesson. The disciples have been Jesus' constant companions throughout his ministry, traveling with him from one village, town, and mountainous region to the next, yet they often appeared more concerned with limitation than with the possibility of resurrection and life. Their interests were often at odds with Jesus' ministerial focus. An example of this was their discussion with about the origin of the blind man's condition, rather than in the curative potential of Jesus' encounter with the man.

Having received the news of Lazarus's illness and subsequent death, the disciples again struggled to come to terms with Jesus' decision to make the treacherous journey to Judea after a two-day delay. They questioned the wisdom of returning to Judea at all, recalling their narrow escape from stoning just a few days earlier. What was more, by Jesus' own admission, Lazarus was already dead. Nonetheless, Jesus insisted that they make the journey, emphasizing the revelatory possibility that Lazarus's illness and subsequent death had occasioned and assuring the disciples that the journey would be stumble-free. Although Thomas and the others were not completely convinced—"Let us also go, that we may die with him" (v. 16)—these friends and companions made the journey with him. Maybe they accompanied Jesus because they were intrigued by the possibility of resurrection.

As Jesus and the disciples approached Mary and Martha's home, the tension between life and death intensified and the immediacy of grief was overwhelming. Weeping and lament filled the air as family and friends gathered to mourn Lazarus's demise and final sleep. It had been four days since Lazarus's death, marking the completion of the soul's journey from life to death. His soul no longer lingered near the body, indicating that Lazarus was truly dead.

The finality of death deepened the grief of Mary and Martha and their disappointment that Jesus had not arrived until now—"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (v. 21). Martha and Mary considered Jesus a friend and believed that God would have honored his requests—if Jesus had arrived sooner. They trusted him as a teacher, healer, miracle worker, and believed him to be the Messiah come from God. They unquestionably anticipated the resurrection of the dead *on the last day* and looked forward to uniting with their brother Lazarus again. However, they had no experiential referent to support Jesus' self-identification as "the resurrection and life." Jesus was speaking of resurrection as a present reality—"I am"—leaving Martha, Mary, and their community skeptical, yet fascinated with the possibility of new life.

As we observe Mary, Martha, and their community from a distance, we too are intrigued by the possibility of resurrection and feel compelled to join them at the tomb. We listen as they wondered out loud if Jesus' tears were indicative of love or regret; we heard the strain in Jesus' voice as he instructed them to remove the stone that covered the tomb; we sense the anticipatory tension as profound faith and debilitating doubt converged in that single event. We know the conclusion, yet breathlessly awaiting Lazarus's emergence from the tomb. "Lazarus, come out!" (v. 43)

reverberates throughout the tomb, awakening Lazarus's lifeless body to the revivifying call of life.

As Christians, we believe in the power of resurrection, having been formed in a tradition in which birth, life, death, and resurrection are cyclical occurrences. Resurrection and life are central to the meaning that we make for our lives. In this respect, resurrection confronts us as an urgent call, beckoning us to consider the possibility that those whom our world deems socially, physically, spiritually, and emotionally dead might live into a new reality. We pray for the power of resurrection in the lives of persons and communities bound by the grave clothes of war, genocide, poverty, disease, dis-ease, systematic abuse, and systemic oppression.

Releasing persons and communities from the clutches of death also demands something of us, as did Lazarus's resurrection of his community. Though Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb, he urged those who were alive and well, "Unbind him, and let him go." Resurrected women, men, and children today also require caring communities that are willing to nurture and strengthen them until they are able to walk alone; to remove the grave clothes of self-doubt, social isolation, marginalization, and oppression; to tear away the wrappings of fear, anxiety, loss, and grief, so that unbound women, men, and children might walk in dignity and become creative agents in the world.

There is a poster with the slogan, "Consider the possibilities ..."—ellipsis marks indicating that there is more to be said, this slogan provocatively reminds us to dream beyond the boundaries, to consider the possibility of resurrection, anticipating it so profoundly that we stand at the tomb of suffering and pain, listening for the voice of Jesus, ready to unbind those whom God delivers, even now. **Veronice Miles**

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