

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The service for the Burial of the Dead in the Episcopal church begins with a silent procession led by the priest who opens the service by chanting or speaking the words: "I am resurrection, and I am life, says the Lord. Whoever has faith in me shall have life, even though he die, and everyone who has life and has committed himself to me in faith, shall not die for ever." We "cling to these words like few other sayings of Jesus." They take us back to the story of the raising of Lazarus, and they are central to our faith. The raising of Lazarus is one of the most beloved of all stories in the New Testament, in part because in this account we begin to discern what lies ahead for Jesus. On the fifth Sunday in Lent, it is the perfect reminder of our upcoming Holy Week, just seven days hence.

John clearly includes this narrative because he is using it to convince his readers to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. He tells us so in his statement of purpose in chapter 20, where he makes it clear that he "carefully and intentionally decided what miracle stories to include in his book." That selection "is not arbitrary but fits perfectly his theological and redemptive purpose 'so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and through believing you may have life in his name'." In fact, this story is the last in a series of seven "signs" in John's gospel – *from the miracle of the water changed to wine at Cana, to the feeding of the 5,000 and the healing of the man born blind* --- all of which point to the divinity of Jesus. And this narrative also reminds us that John the Baptist did no signs or miracles. Thus, Jesus is greater than John, and it was important to the early church to make this clear because John had assembled a large and loyal following.

The story of the raising of Lazarus appears only in John's gospel, and not in the Synoptic gospels. This has led to controversy: some who try to explain this dichotomy imagine that if all four of the gospel writers did not mention it, it must not have happened. But this is an extreme position. For one thing, the four writers take different positions on the importance of the event which suggests different perspectives on the various miracles attributed to Jesus. For John, the raising of Lazarus is the precipitating event leading directly to the arrest, trial and execution of Jesus. For the writers of the Synoptic gospels, it was the cleansing of the Temple (the overthrow of the tables of the money-changers) which led to the Passion.

However, in all four of the narratives it is clear that the enemies of Jesus had it in for him from the very beginning of his ministry which makes it difficult to argue in favor of one precipitating event leading directly to the crucifixion. Actually, however, it may be more to the point to look at John's view of Jesus to understand the role of the raising of Lazarus in the story of adult ministry.

In John, it would be more accurate to say that his account makes clear that "the real catalyst of the crucifixion is the Triune God that John proclaims. It is Jesus who has authority to lay down and take up *his own life*...it is God who has established when Jesus will die and God who causes Caiaphas to

prophesy that Jesus is to die.” When John records the arrest of Jesus, “he portrays Jesus as being in control. He doesn’t present Jesus as a pitifully crucified wretch whose life has been taken...(because) *Jesus lays down his life.*” Thus, it is God who is in charge, not a particular precipitating event that the authors of the Synoptic gospels choose not to record. In all of the gospel accounts, the crucifixion is portrayed “as the culmination of an extended period of antagonization.”

This is also the story of Mary and Margaret, the sisters of Lazarus. It begins with a lament, the sisters complaining to Jesus that had he been there earlier, he could have saved their brother. This makes it a story about what it means to be in relationship with Jesus. Love is inextricably linked to death in this story. “No one has greater love than this...” or “For God so loved the world...” --- these passages are as much a part of the story as the fact that these are the only individuals in John whom Jesus is specifically said to love. We are told that Jesus loves “his own,” and the Son loves the Father, and Jesus loves Martha, Mary and Lazarus.

The love of Jesus for Lazarus is important. It is clear throughout the account that Lazarus is beloved by him. This matters because it reminds us that when Jesus speaks of love, it is no abstract emotion he is describing. He is in relationship with people, some of whom are particularly close to him. His love for them is not a design to convey the nature of an emotion he uses to impress people. It is clear that his act of love in his relationship with those close to him is real and is motivated by a genuine love for humankind. In this way, the most personal of encounters speak universal lessons whose power resides in their authenticity.

We can be certain that Lazarus was truly dead and not simply in a coma or unconscious. This is because he had been in the tomb for four days. Without embalming, bodies in the first century were buried on the day of death with the period of mourning following the burial. Jewish belief held that the soul left the body after three days. In the reading, note the reference to the obvious smell that would be associated with the decay of a body after four days in the grave. When Jesus calls to Lazarus, we are reminded of John’s telling us at another point in his account that sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd who calls them by name. Lazarus hears his name and emerges from the tomb, but he can be raised only by the shepherd whose voice he recognizes.

What is described in this story is not a resurrection. It more closely resembles a *resuscitation* because Lazarus will, in fact, truly die at some point. It is simply that the one life he leads has been extended through a miracle. But all of this provides a window into first century beliefs about death. The anger Jesus shows when approaching the tomb tells us that he shares the views of his compatriots at the time. For them, death was “not a door through which people passed (on their way) to heaven.” It was “an enemy of the God of life.” Thus Jesus is angry over the death of his friend because death has separated them and it is causing real pain in those he loves.

In the end, this story conveys a sign of “something greater to come” for the followers of Jesus, but the Passion is yet to be revealed. The rest of the story of the ministry of Jesus has not yet occurred.

Nevertheless, “it is a sign that speaks powerfully of the eternal life given by God, through Jesus, in defeat of death itself.” This eternal life begins in the present. We step into it now. And “within this sign is the promise that the final tomb of death itself will be undone, and we will be called forth into eternal life with God.” Here “the tombstone is rolled away...by the grace of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and he calls us forth into life” eternal which crucially begins in the present moment and continues forever. **Thanks be to God!**

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