

# RESURRECTION AND LIFE

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John 11:1-45 - The raising of Lazarus

One of the challenges I have faced in interpreting scripture throughout my time in the ministry has been to break out of the habit of taking a story like this and trying to abstract some rational doctrinal propositions. The church has demonstrated that habit with many passages of scripture, especially in John's gospel, saying here are some beliefs, some things about Jesus and about God. And then the story itself is discarded. One of the newer directions in scripture interpretation is to take the stories themselves more seriously, and to let them continue to live as stories so that when we walk out of here on a Sunday morning after hearing a sermon on a story like this, we leave with more than just a few ideas such as this is what it means or that is what it means. Instead, we walk out with a deeper feeling of the story in our hearts. So it's a real challenge for me, too, to invite people to live into the story.

What I am going to do today, therefore, is approach this story by just talking about the different people who were involved. I do this because I think the story is composed in a way that portrays people's responses to Jesus and invites us to engage the story in relation to those responses.

The story begins at the time Jesus hears that Lazarus is ill and about to die. Jesus says, "We're going to go to Bethany," and the disciples respond, "No, you're not going to go to Bethany!" Bethany is in Judea. Jesus' ministry moves back and forth between Galilee, a remote area and therefore a little safer for someone like Jesus; and Judea which is the centre or the heart of Jewish culture. Judea is the location of the leaders and the rulers and the people in authority of the Jewish temple. The last time Jesus and the disciples were there, Jesus was about to be stoned. So the disciples' immediate response to Jesus' statement that they were going to Bethany is one of fear. It's a fear of the danger, a fear of the Jews, and ultimately a fear of death.

Throughout the gospel stories we often hear Jesus trying to teach something and the disciples act as a foil--they just don't get it. And so the gospel writers portray that dialogue between Jesus presenting his teachings, on the one hand, and on the other hand someone misunderstanding and not quite getting it. Here again we have the disciples in that role. They are afraid of dying and afraid of the Jews, and that sets up this story which has something to do with the confrontation of death and the confrontation of that fear. Jesus speaks of Lazarus, after he has died, as being asleep. He sees Lazarus in that spiritual sense of the soul--the dying and the rising. But the disciples don't get it; they think he is talking literally. Here again the disciples act as a kind of foil. They think Jesus is talking literally, materially, and so he has to speak more plainly. "Look," he says, "Lazarus is dead, and we're going to Bethany because Lazarus is dead." Then Thomas chimes in. (This is the same Thomas who gets such a lot of bad press. He is the "doubting Thomas," the one who seems not to get it, or sometimes seems almost to be in

opposition to Jesus.) The disciples have expressed their fear of death, but Thomas chimes in with a remark that I think is sarcastic: “Well, sure, let’s all go and we’ll all die with him.” He is extending that fear of the Jews and the danger of going down into Judea, but he is sarcastic about it. On a deeper level, what we hear in Thomas is an echo of the earlier writings of Paul who talked about how we all die with Christ and rise with Christ. (This “echo” is later, in an historical sense, but earlier in a literary sense because John has written a hundred years after the time of Jesus.) In Colossians, Paul says, “We have died with Christ and our lives are hidden with Christ in God.”

The story portrays, therefore, this movement toward the dying, all of us together. Jesus arrives at the edge of town, and we have three people whom he loves very much--two sisters and a brother, Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Lazarus has died. Jesus waited for two days, then there was a two-day journey, and so Jesus arrives four days after Lazarus’s death. Martha comes out to meet him and says, “If you had been here my brother would not have died.” So we get in Martha’s expression that understanding of Jesus as one who would prevent death; but this is a misunderstanding. Jesus says, “He will rise again”; and she says, “Yes I know, he will rise again at the resurrection at the last day.” Now that was standard belief among Pharisaic Judaism of the time. So she states the conventional promise that people believed in in that tradition: “He will rise again at the last day; yes, I know that.” But then Jesus pushes into something deeper, and that’s where he says to her, “I am the resurrection and the life.” Now “I am” is a distinctive expression in the Greek language. Normally in Greek if you are going to say, for example, “I am hungry,” the verb “to be” is not included. When it is included it is for some kind of special emphasis.

The expression “I am” reflects the story in Exodus of Moses at the burning bush. God appears and Moses asks, “Who will I say sent me?” The answer is “I am,” the words in this sense being a name of the sacred. In Jesus’ time that expression was used not only in his own Jewish tradition, but also in other neighbouring cultures.

The expression “I am” appears several times in John’s gospel--e.g., “I am the light of the world,” “I am the good shepherd.” It therefore takes on a distinctive power and meaning for people, and so if we are really to hear the story we must hear “I am” with its reference to the sacred. Jesus, as always, is there as the sacred presence inviting people to embrace that presence. He says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live.” “Even though they die, yet shall they live.” That begins to sound paradoxical, and it becomes even more paradoxical in the next line when he says, “And those who live and believe in me will never die.” Consider: Even though they die, they will never die! His use of that paradoxical language is a signal to us to look, to think, beyond the material and the surface, and into the spiritual depth of what life is and what death is.

So he challenges Martha to a deeper sense of belief. Martha is saying things like “Yes, I believe he [Lazarus] will rise again at the last day.” This is a fact or a proposition--an idea--and she is expressing agreement. The belief that Jesus is challenging or inviting her to adopt is something deeper than agreeing with an idea or with doctrine. It’s a much more relational sort of thing in which to believe. It’s like going to someone you love, someone you trust, someone you care for, and saying “I believe in you.” That “someone” might even be one of your children, for we try to let our children know that we believe in them. That’s not some rational assent to an idea; it’s a deep relational sense of a person.

It's not knowing information; it's knowing someone you love the way you know somebody, and you believe in that person, which means to live in him or her and to let that person live in you. That's the kind of belief into which Jesus is inviting Martha.

Jesus then asks her, "Do you believe this?" and she flips back into reciting the old promises: "Yes, I believe that you are the Messiah, the son of God who is coming into the world," which is again just a standard reflection of the promises that the Jewish people had believed in for so long. So you get the tension, growing all the way through here, of Jesus challenging people to engage the sacred, to engage the life and death in a deeper way; and of people just not getting it. They are coming closer, but they are still reflecting that old way.

Mary, Martha's sister, hears that Jesus is still at the edge of town and has not yet come into the house. She is in the house, mourning and in tears. Some people are mourning with her, as was customary in those times. Mary gets up and leaves the house, and the others go with her assuming she's going to the tomb. But she doesn't; she goes to meet Jesus. What a choice to make in the face of death, in the mourning, in the sorrow, in the grief--go to the tomb and mourn or go to Christ. Mary is going to Christ. By going to Jesus she finds her way into the heart of the sacred and the life that is promised in the story.

She begins by telling him the same thing Martha told him: "If you had been here my brother would not have died." But Jesus responds to her very differently from the way he did to Martha. With Martha he began by talking about "I am the resurrection, the life," and asking if she believed that. With Mary it's a matter of just moving into the pure feeling, the passion, of the moment. Mary has fallen to her knees and is in tears. Jesus is touched, and his response is pure compassion. He, too, is moved to tears at that moment. And more than tears, the story says he is also troubled or disturbed in spirit. The story gets translated into English in many different ways, but the Greek verb also contains a sense of anger, not wild rage but an aggressive kind of anger--the kind of anger that is needed to push against that which kills or threatens life. So we have a picture of Jesus coming to Lazarus's death, not like a magician who is being cool and suave and waving his hand and creating an illusion or manipulating supernatural powers. Nor does Jesus come in the way the ancient Greek story portrays Socrates facing his death in prison when he was about to drink the hemlock, at the same time very coolly and rationally expounding on the immortality of the soul. Jesus comes in neither of those ways. He is not cool at all. He's into anger, he's into a deep feeling, he's in grief, he's crying. He does not arrive and say, "I've got this under control; I'll just get him back to life here," for that would not be the correct portrayal at all.

Neither is that the way Jesus is portrayed when he faces his own death. In the garden of Gethsemane we again find that deep, aggrieved, profound, anguish in Jesus' soul. So we don't have a cool, rationalistic approach to death here either. We have, in a way, a foreshadowing of the passion. Jesus is there, immersed in the pain and the grief and the anguish of this moment as he confronts the power of death.

So that's his response to Mary. Then they go together to the tomb, and again the story reiterates that he is in tears. He's weeping, he's crying, he's in grief. And then he calls out, and you can feel in that call the troubled, angry, aggressive, pushing against the power of death. What we have in Jesus is someone who engages the powers in our world, whether in the authorities of our world or in the things that happen within the

depths of our own souls--within the dark side of our own personalities. On all levels there is the sense that death has a kind of force--I'm not talking materially now, but in terms of the forces in the world that would destroy life. These forces are all around us, always within us and around us. Jesus on our behalf takes a stand, and pushes against all that would destroy life, and at the same time enters into the grief and the pain and the sorrow himself. Then the story portrays the Jews responding, those who were with him, who came to believe.

Now that's as far as Ruth [Ford] read. The story goes on for quite a few more verses, into the part where the chief priests and the leaders of the Jews--the Pharisees--got together and had their council. They were facing a very dangerous situation. What were they to do with this person? Their decision was to seek his death. This story leads, therefore, to that final moment when the authorities of the time decided that Jesus must die. We have the Jews who were with him believing, and others deciding he must die.

The story takes us to a point of choice, and it's an eternal sort of choice that is always before us when we encounter the story of Christ, not translated into doctrine, but just encounter the story. At that point we experience the choice in our own hearts. There is no compelling truth here, in the sense that to be compelled is no longer to be free. There is no truth that takes away our freedom. It's a truth that profoundly sets us free, sets us free in a choice that we must make every day of our lives. The sacred is before us; it is present. Life is present, and in the face of death the sacred stands against all that would destroy life. It is given to us in a story, something that is a much, much higher truth than can be captured in any doctrine. Therefore it must be story, and the story is before us, and the choice is before us. And it's left open.

This is the season of Lent when we can leave questions open, because it's good for us to live the open choice as we move toward the cross and then experience in the cross the challenge to make that choice. The choice to live in Christ is the choice to live truly, even in the face of death, believing that life in Christ enables us to die with Christ, trusting that we rise with Christ. We simply choose that, and that choice makes all the difference.

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