



“New Life in *This* Life”

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John 11:1–45 (NRSV)***

David Powers, writing for iucc.com, describes today’s gospel lesson as “. . . a preview of coming attractions”¹—a kind of first-century movie trailer. He explains, “[The Raising of Lazarus] appears at this point in the Jesus story to pique our interest and help us know what to look for when the [Easter] blockbuster opens in a couple of weeks.”²

The clip opens with the community in an uproar. Pan to a local coffee shop where a man scans the obit section of the daily paper and learns that a much-admired friend, Lazarus, has recently died. The obituary reads: Lazarus, beloved brother of Mary and Martha, pillars of the church, and companion of Jesus, the famous healer, died suddenly of unknown causes, and was buried in a tomb near Bethany. In addition to his two sisters and best friend, Jesus, Lazarus leaves a host of friends and family who mourn his passing.³

Now, flash back to another scene where Jesus learns of Lazarus’ illness, and he hesitates to return to Bethany. Perhaps his hesitation is due to an overwhelming sense of grief. Perhaps he finds the death of his friend hard to face. Perhaps he needs more time to process his feelings before facing the grief of others and their needs. Or perhaps he’s just too afraid to return to the town where he narrowly escaped stoning just a few days earlier.

Justifiable explanations abound as to why Jesus didn’t just race back to Bethany when he got the news that Lazarus was dying. John’s explanation in 11:4, regarding Jesus’ delay, was that Lazarus’ predicament would glorify God, but he doesn’t explain how so until several verses later.

Despite the many valid reasons why Jesus was slow to return to Bethany, it is perhaps no surprise that when he did return, “Martha [lamented], ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’”⁴

¹ David, Powers, Stillspeaking Lent Devotional: Sunday, March 9, 2008.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ John 11:21.

Jesus' response to her cry was anything but predictable. Rather than extending his sympathies, or offering an explanation about his delayed arrival, Jesus said, "Your brother will rise again."⁵ And then he asked Mary if she believed what he was saying, and she said, "I know that he will rise again on the last day."⁶

Next Jesus sent Martha to summon Mary from their home, where she had been sitting *shiva* with their friends and neighbors. (*Shiva* is the seven-day mourning period practiced by the bereaved in Jewish culture.) The other mourners followed Mary and Martha to meet Jesus. When, Mary—like her sister—laid eyes on Jesus, she wailed, "If you had been here Jesus, my brother would not have died."

Rather than responding directly to the women's comments, Jesus joined them in their grief. The *KJV* of John 11:36 says, "Jesus wept." Other translations are not so succinct.

Think about that short, but powerful sentence for a moment: Jesus wept.

Often times when there is a death in our parish, someone comes to me, and asks, "What can I do to help the grieving family?" I have learned to be prepared with a range of answers. Most people are energized by the adrenaline that rushes through our bodies in a time of crisis, and so they/we want to do something active, something concrete. I often begin by suggesting that folks help Carol Price with the memorial reception, or help Kathy Miller fold the worship bulletins, and add that they could also send sympathy notes to the family.

Moreover, I try to explain that simply being with a grieving person or family is one of the most powerful and helpful things that any of us can do for others in a time of loss. In short, we can show up, and weep with those who weep. We can show up and weep like Jesus wept when Lazarus died.

Once we allow some time for weeping, it becomes possible to move on. In the case of today's gospel reading, Jesus wept, and then he moved on. He asked where Lazarus was buried, and he led his friends to the cemetery where Lazarus was buried. When the group arrived at the tomb, Jesus asked that the stone be rolled away from the tomb.

Mary and Martha protested the idea at first, reminding Jesus that Lazarus had been dead for four days and that there would be a stench.⁷ But Jesus persisted, and encouraged the two to trust and believe. Meanwhile, the friends found levers and rolled away the stone from the tomb.

Once the stone was removed, Jesus offered thanks to God for answered prayer, and shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" According to John's gospel, "The dead man came out

⁵ John 11:23

⁶ John 11:25

⁷ The Jews do not traditionally practice embalming.

[with his grave cloths still hanging from his body.]” And then Jesus said to his friends, “Unbind him, and let him go.”⁸

In subsequent verses, we read how news of Lazarus’ raising, and Jesus’ role in his resurrection, spread far and wide, and many came to believe that Jesus was the son of God and *messiah*.

But some, John explains, went to the Pharisees, and described this miracle and the impact that it had on those who learned about it. From then on, the Pharisees set out to end “the Jesus movement” by putting Lazarus to death, once and for all, and by turning the Roman authorities against Jesus.

II

The character, Lazarus, and the story of his resurrection are interesting and pivotal narrative artifacts in the gospels.

Outside of John 11, the only other reference to a person named “Lazarus” is in Luke’s gospel, where Jesus tells the parable of “The Rich Man and Lazarus.” (Remember that one? It’s the parable in which Jesus encourages his followers to help the poor, and uses the story about the Rich Man and Lazarus as a warning against materialism that defies the needs of the poor.)

Given that Martha’s family was depicted in the gospels as having sufficient means to own a home and contribute to Jesus’ ministry, it seems that the Lazarus in John’s gospel is probably not the same Lazarus who appears in Luke’s gospel.

A further curiosity about the character of Lazarus is whether the guy in today’s gospel reading was truly the brother of Mary and Martha. None of the other gospels mention that either Mary or Martha had a brother, or that two were from Bethany.

The resurrection account compounds the perplexity of today’s reading, particularly for liberal Protestants like us, since the story doesn’t easily align with what we know about the laws of natural science.

So, I know you’re all wondering, “What’s Arlene going to say about this resurrection? Did Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead? Does she believe in the resurrection? Should we? Must we?”

Here’s what I believe. I wonder what you believe.

- 1) I believe that John believed that Lazarus was raised from the dead.
- 2) I believe that the Johannine community, who received John’s gospel, believed that Lazarus was raised from the dead.⁹

⁸ John 11:44

- 3) I believe that Lazarus could have been raised from the dead.
- 4) I believe that we will never be able to prove by scientific methods whether Lazarus was raised from the dead.
- 5) I believe that metaphorical resurrections can be as powerful and life-transforming as literal resurrections.
- 6) And I believe that my faith, and our faithfulness, is *not* dependent upon whether we believe that Lazarus was literally raised from the dead.

So, in sum, I believe that there is room for a wide range of interpretations of Lazarus' death and resurrection. Which interpretation is most meaningful for us may vary, depending on our respective circumstances at a given point in time. Some examples of how we might interpret the resurrection of Lazarus follow.

III

One of the most common ways that I have heard this text interpreted and applied by progressive Protestant preachers is, ironically, a kind of literal interpretation—as a coming out story. I have heard more than one LGBT preacher describe her or his process of “coming out of the closet” as something like Lazarus being coaxed out of the tomb by his loved ones. (This isn't exactly the way I have described my coming-out process, but I can appreciate why others would.)

Those who describe their coming-out process in this way typically see Lazarus' tomb as a metaphor for the “closet,” as that place where they have hidden all or part of themselves; where they felt bound, even metaphorically dead, until loved ones helped them move away the stone that had kept them sealed off from society and called them out to live a new life this side of heaven.

Regardless of one's sexual orientation, I suspect that a metaphorical interpretation of the resurrection of Lazarus is something that many of us can relate to. Most of us, at one time in our lives—maybe now—have become aware that some truth, some self-discovery, dictates a radical pronouncement or change in our behavior, so that we can experience new life. That truth may have to do with expressing some aspect of ourselves or some truth that we have not previously shared with any or many others.

IV

Another contemporary interpretation of Lazarus' resurrection is as an analogy to a person and family's recovery from addiction. The recovery stories that I've heard framed

⁹ Resurrection and other miracles were regularly attributed to healers and prophets in the late first century, which was the time when John's gospel was transcribed. So this account about Jesus' raising Lazarus made him special, but not unique from other faith healers of the time.

in the narrative of Lazarus' raising often describe the addict as being like Lazarus. In this scenario, everyone knows that the addict is on a crash course to death. Loved ones often try fervently, like Martha, to find help for the addict, but help is ineffective until loved ones (like the friends outside Lazarus' tomb) call for the addict to come out of their self-designed tomb. That "calling out" process is what 12-steppers call "an intervention."

A 12-step intervention is an occasion when persons of influence in an addict's life confront the addict about his or her addiction and present the addict with a direct path to sobriety, and then offer their support if the individual chooses the path to sobriety, and enforce consequences if the addict continues to drink and do drugs.

Today, I want to give a special "shout out" to the 12-step biker clubs that are worshipping with us now, and let you know that Kevin and Suzi Casey have invited several of their friends who are involved in clean and sober biker clubs in the area. Today's biker blessing was inspired by Kevin Casey, who approached me more than three years ago, and asked if Eden Church would host a biker blessing for his club. I said, "Sure, what's a biker blessing?" Now you know the rest of the story.

V

Part of the power of the parallels between the raising of Lazarus and modern day coming out and addiction intervention stories is that these stories point to the earthiness of Lazarus' resurrection. So often you'll hear preachers talking about how Jesus came to tell us all about heaven and to take us there. And while I do believe that he talked some about heaven, and that he has gone to God and is there to welcome our souls in the next life, I believe even more fervently that God sent Jesus to help us experience new life in *this* life, and that the overwhelming message of John 11 is that Jesus raised Lazarus so he and his friends and family could experience new life in this life, and that God intends all of us to experience new life here and now, and to experience heaven on earth. Amen.