

John 11:1-45 Raising of Lazarus 2020

I am the resurrection and the life.

Those who trust in me, even though they die, will live.

Today's scripture passage is, like Lent, a sort of dress rehearsal for what's coming. This story appears only in John's gospel, and it's the action of Jesus that sets in motion his death and resurrection.

And, appropriately, it's about the death of his good friend Lazarus, and Jesus' bringing him back into earthly life.

If you Google 'Lazarus tomb' you will probably get a photo of the place in Bethany where tradition tells us that this miracle – this last of John's seven signs – happened.

It's a hole in a rock wall, down about knee level, and just big enough for a person to get through.

You have to bend down about double to get in,

and I understand that coming out of it requires almost gymnastic ability.

You have to come out head first, maneuvering along the rocks,

trying not to scrape your back as you look up and emerge.

If tradition is right and it really is the tomb of Lazarus,

then he didn't walk out like a man released from prison.

He came out like a baby being born again, first his poor wrapped face,

then his bandaged hands, and finally his feet.

Isn't this a great image for how we all feel at times?

I guessing at this time we are all experiencing some variation of this.

All wrapped up in life's issues – just wishing to break free?

Lazarus was the brother of Martha and Mary, some of Jesus' closest friends.

When Lazarus became ill, they sent word to Jesus,

but he waited two days before he came to them.

Of course, he knew what was going to happen,

but for Martha and Mary his delay caused hurt.

'Lord, if you would have been here our brother would not have died.'

These words contain faith in the power of Jesus, and love of their brother, and blame, too.

Don't we sometimes think 'if only we'd acted differently – called the doctor sooner,

taken them to a different hospital, made a different decision about treatment;'

maybe we even hold blame for the medical team.

For Martha and Mary, Jesus would have been the difference.
 After Martha says this to Jesus, there's an exchange about resurrection.
 Jesus says 'I am the resurrection and the life;
 he who trusts in me shall not die, but have everlasting life.'

Or, perhaps, 'I am the resurrection and the life; he who trusts in me *will come to life*,
 and everyone who is alive and trusts in me shall never die at all.'

Martha speaks of resurrection as something that will happen in the future –
 we've heard this idea so often.

I think it's an idea that most of us were taught --
 that believing in Jesus is like a coupon for eternal life.
 Later on, when we need it, it will get us into heaven.

But Jesus didn't speak of the future here. Not 'I will give you eternal life.'
 He spoke in the present. 'I **AM** the resurrection and the life.'
 Those who trust in him begin their eternal lives now.

Martha and Mary and all the rest are crying, wailing, in grief.
 'Jesus wept' – or 'Jesus began to cry' –
 and at first those around Jesus say 'see how much he loved him.'
 But Jesus already knew he'd bring Lazarus back.
 The Greek word used for what Jesus did is different.
 The others were wailing, but Jesus teared up and wept.
 Jesus wept that Mary and Martha and all the rest who were wailing didn't get it.
 Here it was the end of his ministry – they were some of his closest friends –
 and they still didn't get it.

So Jesus went to the tomb. Now, I don't use the King James Version of the Bible often,
 but I read about how it translates the raising of Lazarus.
 Jesus, after weeping and being emotionally moved,
 commands those around him to open Lazarus' tomb. There's instant protest.
 Lazarus had been dead for a few days,
 and everyone knew that rolling that stone away wouldn't be pretty.
 Martha calls out: *But Lord, he stinketh!* I love that.

Anyway, then, Jesus showed them what he meant. He said: 'Lazarus, come out!'
 Lazarus was most certainly gone on, in those four days he'd been dead,
 into the bright light of God's heart. Yet, he came back when his friend Jesus asked him.
 He crawled through that small, dark, rough hole and stumbled out into the light of Jesus.

Perhaps this raising of Lazarus isn't something that Jesus did to Lazarus. Perhaps he did it *with* him. To show the others that life and death in Christ's eternal time aren't as separate as we might think. That those boundaries are indeed permeable. That faith moves us through the dark tunnels of our lives into the light. Over and over again.

Interviews with people who have been resuscitated after being pronounced clinically dead often reveal that, first, they may evidently get a glance of a figure of light waiting for them on the other side, and then they note that they are very reluctant to be brought back again to this one. On the other hand, when Lazarus opened his eyes to see the figure of Jesus standing there in the daylight beside him, I'll bet he couldn't for the life of him tell which side he was on.

Christ is our light; eternal light, both now and forever. And, isn't this story about Lazarus what Lent is about? It's a short time of darkness before the light of Easter. We act out the truth of life, seen through the lens of our faith. Year after year, we experience this rebirth. And, it doesn't always have to be dark. Sometimes, it can be full of inspiration that isn't quiet or somber. Rather, the hope that's ours in faith is a constant. It's a re-focusing, re-energizing and re-directing our life. It carries us through life's tunnels as light that isn't just the beacon at the end, but as illumination that's always here, with us.

The good news here is not that miracles happen. The good news in such stories is that vitality, new life, is possible for us, promised to us in fact, even now, in face of our private doubts and fears and the reality of our public world, a world enthralled with the way of death. It happens all the time. Any time we have a loss – illness, death, divorce, the end of a relationship, a job, whatever losses this virus is and will end up causing – life is absolutely full of losses of every type and size – we heal and renew ourselves as someone more complete, more whole, closer to God. We emerge from the tunnel of darkness and chaos reborn.

This final one of the seven signs in John's gospel is a metaphor for life itself. It's about trust in what God can and does do for us, over and over. The hope that isn't naïve, passive, wishful thinking, but hearty, robust, joyful confidence in God's presence. It's about eternal life *now*. Amen.