

Lent 5, Year A
John 11:1-45
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The raising of Lazarus is both literal center and the dramatic climax of John's Gospel. Everything that has happened thus far leads us to this point. The wedding at Cana where Jesus turned water into wine, the night meeting with Nicodemus when Jesus told him that he must be "born again," offering the woman at the well "living" and not just "running" water, and giving sight to the man born blind all demonstrate that Jesus brings not just continued existence to those who follow him, but a qualitatively new and different kind of life. Now we see this most remarkably demonstrated in the story of Lazarus, a man who, when we meet him, has been dead four days, and yet before the eyes of many witnesses is brought to life. After this moment everything changes. For it is now in response to that resurrection that the authorities decide Jesus must die, and it is also at this point that Jesus ends his public ministry and meets with his disciples behind closed doors in a scene that will take up most of the rest of the Gospel. There he will prepare them for his own death and resurrection.

In order to understand what John is doing I believe we need to see it in this context of what has gone before. Everything that has happened suggests that Jesus' purpose is this indeed not at all to assure that people can continue to live the same kind of life they have lived before, but to bestow upon those who

believe the gift of a new and different kind of life. Most simply put, he is not an agent of the continuation of the way things are, he is an agent of transformation into something new, better and more life giving than before. What this means is that the glory of God Jesus declares will be revealed is not in this story confined to what happens to Lazarus, as truly remarkable as that is. The glory of God is revealed also, and perhaps more powerfully, in what happens to Martha, Mary and the other witnesses of this event. Look just for a moment at Martha to see what I mean.

Martha is deeply distressed because by the time Jesus arrives Lazarus has been dead four days. When Jesus tells her: “your brother will rise again” she agrees with that because after all, she understands the teaching of the church and is willing to hope for that. Her religion, in other words, is the way religion often is, the assent of the intellect to certain propositions about God, and a willingness, even a happy willingness, to act of the basis of those propositions.

But Jesus tells her, in effect, that this is not at all what he is talking about. His understanding of life with God goes far beyond the mind’s assent to particular ideas. He tells her he is talking about what happens when people experience the presence and the power of God in him, and how it changes life altogether. This is why, in response to her statement that she believes that some day Lazarus will be raised, he tells her that he is resurrection and life, and that everyone who perceives the power and presence of God in him will not die, but have entirely new life. That statement changes Martha completely. It is here that

she discovers in the very midst of her greatest grief that the deepest power of her religion is not expressed in intellection assent to certain ideas, no matter how attractive and reassuring. The deepest power of her religion is revealed when she discovers that right here, right now, she is living in the presence of God, and that therefore she, and Lazarus, have already entered into the life of the kingdom, already begun to experience the power of the resurrection.

This, I think, is where the story of the raising of Lazarus speaks most powerfully to us. As long as we confine our attention to Lazarus, we don't notice this crucial aspect of the story, that it is really about what happens to Martha and Mary, but once we realize that they are the dynamic characters in this passage things become clearer, at least for me. For I would say that much of the time my religion is centered in an intellectual assent to certain propositions about God, and I am not alone in that. Indeed, one of the enduring problems of Christianity is that often we focus on right thinking above most other things. Because of that our faith often does for us what it did for Martha; it provides a source of comfort when the pain of our own lives confronts us, but without offering us a transforming experience that frees us to see that we are already in the new world brought about by Christ. Let me give an example from my own meager experience. As my father was dying at this time last year I was able to be with him. At one point I was alone in the room with him and was suddenly seized by the need to whisper to him Dame Julian's famous saying. "All will be well, and all will be well," I said, at which point he uttered what turned out to be his very

last words: “and all manner of things shall be well.” In that moment was real peace, and a very deep sense arose in me that has not yet subsided of the truth of that statement, and I began to live just a little bit differently than I had before. In Christ all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.

St. Paul makes the same statement in the eighth chapter of Romans, another of today’s readings. His contrast between flesh and spirit is not a contrast between stuff that is bad to do and stuff that is good to believe. The contrast he makes here and throughout all his writings is, as I have suggested before, the contrast between rooting one’s self in the existence of this world and rooting oneself in God. Of course God will be a problem if all we expect of divine power is to give us the material things we want, and keep us away from the painful experiences we do not want. That is the life and the desires of the flesh. It isn’t evil or wicked, in fact it is quite human, but it doesn’t get us to God, and often does create hostility with God on our part when things do not go as we just know we need them to go. Every one of us here can attest to the fact that life is often confusing, painful and frustrating, and nothing is going to change that. What can change is our whole perspective as we become rooted in Spirit. Once we find ourselves there we are able to enter into the pain of life without having either to blame ourselves, others or God for what has happened, and to experience that pain as those who know that there is nothing final, nothing ultimate and nothing in it that has the power to tell us who we are or why we matter, because that question has already been decided by God who has declared

in Christ that are his and that we matter ultimately to him. Thus, we can grieve freely and fully, as Martha and Mary did, as well as experience the joys of life, because we know where we belong.

That is the life of the resurrection, it is what happens not just in some supernal realm beyond the sky after we die, but happens here, now. That is what the story of Lazarus is about, not merely or only the resumption of the old life which indeed stands as an important metaphor and illustration of the point, but more profoundly the discovery and reception of a new life seen most clearly in Martha whom Jesus transforms before Lazarus is raised.

I have glimpsed this life from to time, as in the example I gave, but certainly have not allowed myself the freedom of the Spirit to receive this gift from God in its fullest form. Again, I suspect I am not at all unusual in this. Most of us cling to the protection afforded by construing religion as Martha did, as a series of ideas that form the foundation of a pattern of belief and attendant action. I must emphasize that this is not a bad thing at all. There are some things our collective experience tells us are true, and there are patterns of behavior that flow quite naturally from these ideas. Moreover, our religion can be, and often is, a source of comfort when all we really want to do, all we can do in the face of terrible loss such as Martha and Mary faced, is to retreat into the solace of time tested convictions.

What we also see today is that although faith does perhaps begin there, it does not end there, but instead draws us ever deeper into the conjunction of the

Spirit of God made known in the risen Christ and our lives as we lead them. So let us not be satisfied with only the beginning of faith. Let us, as Lent moves on its way toward the Passion and death of Christ, dare seek what Martha found in Jesus, the full power of the resurrection life right here, right now.