

Year A Lent 5 Resurrection *and* Life John 11 vv1 to 45

Jesus has just retreated from Jerusalem where there has been an attempt to stone him to death. So, when he says to his disciples, “Let’s head back to the area right near Jerusalem,” they are, understandably, not thrilled with this plan. They believe death will greet them – the death of Jesus and perhaps death for them too as his followers. They are frightened. They also know that Lazarus – Jesus’ beloved friend – is dead. Certain death and expected death both lie ahead at the end of their journey and into the midst of this death walks life – life in the form of Jesus of Nazareth. Into the midst of the fear of expected death, and the grief and sorrow of Lazarus’ death, Jesus speaks one of his most comforting and well-known “I AM” sayings: I am the resurrection and the life,” he declares to Martha.

Some early manuscripts of this Gospel actually removed the “and the life” bit so that it read as Jesus simply saying, “I am the resurrection.” The copiers of John’s Gospel thought that he was being redundant, saying the same thing twice: I am the resurrection and the life. They’re the same thing, aren’t they. Why say both? If they *are* different, what does it mean to be the resurrection *and* the life?

The disciples seem to disappear from this story once Jesus arrives in Bethany but they are still there, watching and learning as their teacher reveals the true nature of who he is and what that means for the people around him. So, let’s join the disciples and watch and learn with them.

When Jesus arrived in Bethany, just two miles from the death-trap known as Jerusalem, we are told that Lazarus has already been in the tomb for four days. I shared with our bible study group that this is very significant since one prevalent Jewish belief at the time was that a person’s soul left his body by the fourth day.

Lazarus wasn't just dead, he was really dead. We also hear that many people from Jerusalem had made the short trek to console Mary and Martha and to lament the death of Lazarus. Jesus and the disciples aren't totally out of harm's way here and, whatever Jesus does will most certainly be reported back to the religious leaders.

Martha hears of Jesus' arrival and goes out to meet him. What follows is one of the most important conversations in the Gospel. She begins, in her grief, by chastising Jesus. If you had been here, she accuses, my brother would not have died. She continues by saying, she knows that, even now, God will give to Jesus whatever he asks of him. She knows Jesus has power...importantly, the power to heal in this case, but it is clear that she does not fully understand yet who Jesus is. She sees Jesus as one who has God's ear, so to speak, and does the works of God, but one who is not God.

In response to Martha's accusatory, perhaps bitter, opening remark, Jesus reassures her that Lazarus will rise again. To her ears, Martha is not hearing anything new. She thinks Jesus is speaking about the big general resurrection down the road when all people will be raised at the fulfilment of God's kingdom on earth. This is a widely held belief. Lazarus will rise again – as they all will – at some point in the future.

This is where Jesus sets her straight and reveals the true nature of who he is. He says to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Not only am I the future resurrection that you think I'm talking about, he tells her, when all the dead will rise because I open the kingdom of heaven to all

believers but, also, I am the life now. I will give to Lazarus life now. Jesus asks Martha if she believes this and this is when we know that Martha has had her “aha moment.” “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah,” she says, “the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” She realizes that Jesus is not simply a prophet, a man with the ear of God, a man through whom God works. Jesus is the Son of God. Messiah. The one who will redeem the world.

This is where the crucial distinction between Jesus being the resurrection and Jesus being the life comes into play. Yes, Lazarus will be raised on the last day and yes, Lazarus is going to be given life in just a matter of moments but there is still more to Jesus being the life. We turn to the story we heard in Ezekiel (ch.37) in order to add clarification and a fuller understanding of what God gives to us in terms of life. In Ezekiel, we hear God say, “And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.” The important bit of information we need to know here is that God is not speaking to or about dead people. God is speaking to the people who have been forcibly removed from their homes, taken as captives to a foreign land. God is speaking to those people who have turned from God’s ways. Life, being brought up from your grave, is not life as in the opposite of death but, rather, life in the sense of not just living but being truly alive – having meaning, purpose, love and joy that only comes from life with God, life with God’s Spirit within us. God gives us life.

Interestingly, Martha takes this moment of incredible personal insight to make her exit. She returns to the house and, without explaining any of this to Mary, she refers to Jesus simply as the Teacher, as she always does, and sends Mary out to

meet him. Now we hear the exact same accusing opening statement from Mary as we did from Martha. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." It feels like we're going to go through the same learning again, this time with Mary but we don't. Mary does not open the door to hearing from Jesus. She does not express the same faith as Martha had: even now, Martha had said, I know God will listen to you. Our learning with Mary takes a different turn.

Jesus hears her accusation, notices her lack of any profession of faith that he could now still do something about Lazarus' death, sees her weeping in grief, takes in all of the others weeping in grief and John tells us, he was greatly disturbed in spirit. This is an emotional reaction but it is, perhaps, not the one you're picturing. The Greek word for "disturbed" ([enebrimēsato](#)) means literally to groan with indignation, to sigh with chagrin. Despite the time he has spent teaching them, Jesus is seeing their lack of belief in him and he is seriously annoyed and frustrated with this. To top things off, he asks where Lazarus has been laid and they respond, "Come and see." Seems normal enough to us, maybe, but to Jesus this was the breaking point. "Come and see" they say to him to lead him towards death when "Come and see" are the very words he speaks to followers to lead them into life. Jesus weeps, John writes. We, along with "the Jews", may misunderstand these tears and say, "Aww, see how much he loved Lazarus." However, "the Jews", although it's an unfair overgeneralization of all of the Jews, is John's go to reference to the people who do not understand Jesus or what he is doing. Here is no exception. Jesus' weeping is not the same word used to tell us that Mary and the others were weeping. That word (from the Greek *klaió*) means they were grieving, lamenting. "Jesus wept" simply means Jesus shed tears from the Greek *dakruó*).

As if to rub salt in his wound, Jesus hears some of the people saying, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Jesus, again greatly indignant, heads with them to the tomb. He tells them to take away the stone and Martha nearly has heart failure. Her newly found insight into who Jesus truly is – Jesus is life – seems to fall by the wayside as she protests saying there's going to be the horrendous stench of a decomposing body assaulting their nostrils if the stone is removed. We are not so very different from Martha. When faced with the impossible we can forget that, with God, all things are possible. Jesus, likely none too patiently, reminds her that she has so very recently expressed her belief in his identity as the Messiah, the one who gives life, and the stone is removed.

Jesus then publicly thanks God for having heard him. Jesus calls to Lazarus to come out and the dead man, hearing his name, does come out. This idea of speaking and hearing is very important. God spoke the words of creation and there was creation. Psalm 107:20 tells us, "[God] sent forth his word and healed them/and saved them from the grave." John opens his Gospel by telling us that Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, dwelling among us. Jesus tells us that his sheep know his voice and follow him. We know his voice. God's Spirit has been put within us at baptism...pulling us, calling to us. Whether or not we listen to this voice is our choice. Jesus puts before us the choice of life – life in the future when all people are resurrected to live in the fulness of God's kingdom but also life now, now in the abundant joy and love of God's kingdom which is here and is being drawn towards that fullness. All we must do is hear that voice and, like Lazarus, come up out of our graves, o people, and live into that life.