

I Believe!

Gospel of John 11:1-45; Raising of Lazarus

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*Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' **Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.** Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? **Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.**' After saying this, he told them, '**Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.**' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.' When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said 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. Do you believe this?**' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.' When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' **Jesus began to weep.** So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, '**Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?**' Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.' Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.*

Gospel of John 11:1-45, NRSV

The good news is that this morning's sermon will not be as long as this morning's gospel, relatively speaking. The bad news is, at least for me, that this sermon marks the end of my tenure as your Associate Rector. Not the end of our friendship. Not the end of our life together in the body of Christ, or our time together in the life of the church, or even our journey together as faithful companions in the extended St. John's community. But today is the end of my time here in the capacity of priest. Although, I did not come to you as a priest. I came to you....in need of resurrection and new life.

For in the beginning was the word, and the word was.....no. At least the word I heard was no. And I wasn't sure if the word was from God, or if the word was God's, but through this word nothing would

come into being....that is, nothing I had hoped and dreamed and worked for. Actually, that's not true. I never hoped or dreamed of becoming a priest. I hoped and dreamed of becoming a folk singer, a philosopher, a Supreme Court Justice, a Nobel Prize winner, a cowgirl, even.....but never a priest. Priest was a calling I could not escape, not a calling I could ever have imagined pursuing. And yet, three years ago, when I arrived in the study of my now dear, dear friend and mentor, who is your generous and wise rector, my chances of being ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church seemed to me to be about as dead to the world as the 4-day-old body of Lazarus. And slowly but surely you, each one of you helped to roll back the stone until that blessed day when I heard those magic words, that liberating imperative that we all long to hear, regardless of our ecclesiastical orientations. The command to: Come out! And here I am....a new life....a priest. Raised by the power of love.....just like Lazarus. A great coming out story!

This story of Lazarus is a doozy. It stands alone in the Gospel of John. There is a story about a man named Lazarus in the Gospel of Luke, but unlike the nearly anonymous beggar in Luke, John's Lazarus is the brother of Mary and Martha, and the friend of Jesus of Nazareth. This story not only stands alone in John, it replaces the last straw for the authorities before they arrest Jesus, in the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. You will remember, in the three narrative Gospels, Jesus is arrested shortly after chasing the money-changers out of the Temple. This civil disobedience is the final straw for the powers-that-be and the direct impetus for Jesus' arrest. IN the synoptics, Jesus is feared as a rabble rouser, a political activist, an agent of social change who has no regard for the authority of the authorities. The scene in the Temple marks the denouement of Jesus' earthly ministry.

But the fourth Evangelist John, puts Jesus' cleansing of the Temple at the very beginning rather than the very end of *his* account. The disruption in the Temple is not conveyed as the reason for Jesus' arrest, but rather the inauguration of Jesus' mission, a mission to re-vision and re-form and realize the standing and understanding of God on earth; nothing less than turning the tables on the very identity of God. And so, the last straw in John, is not a show of Jesus' strength in the political arena, but a showstopper of divine proportions – it this morning's account of Lazarus. The raising of Lazarus is the end, the finale of Jesus' ministry in John. It is the divinity of Jesus, exemplified here by his absolute power over life and death, that is the message in the Gospel of John. In John, Jesus is not the healer or the prophet or the teacher or the brother, Jesus is God on earth, the beginning and the end. And this difference in the very identity and mission of Jesus, as God's own self versus an agent of God, is at the heart of the age-old debate about whether the mission of the church is to save souls, as the divine Jesus in the Gospel of John would have us believe, or to save lives, as we see the human political activist Jesus encountered in the narrative Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Is our faith about resurrection or life?

*But Jesus said: 'I am the resurrection **and** the life...everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?'* The resurrection **and** the life. And he wants to know: do we believe this? Well, as for me, I believe the life part with no sweat, but the resurrection is a bit more difficult to get my mind around.

The notion of bodily resurrection did not originate in the New Testament. It was already an entrenched part of the Jewish tradition before Jesus was even a twinkle in God's eye. In fact, it can be traced back in our holy scripture to the Book of Daniel, chapter 12, verse 2: "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall wake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." Sounds like the premise for new gameshow hosted by a bald angel.

Nevertheless, the longevity of this concept notwithstanding, I have to admit, there is no more difficult aspect of our faith to embrace than the resurrection. And yet, we intuitively know about the resurrection from our own experience. For resurrection is not only a theological concept, it is an existential one as well...that is, it is a part of our very existence. Bishop Barbara Harris is fond of saying that we are Easter people living in a Good Friday world. And although I suspect she is talking about Christians, I think that all human beings experience resurrection in our lives as certainly as we experience suffering. Resurrection is not a distant concept but a personal experience. And it is, along with suffering, the foundation of our commonality as human beings, of our solidarity with each other.

So while our intellectual selves may have a tough time "believing" in the concept of resurrection, our deepest experiences of life make it impossible for us not to trust in our heart of hearts, that resurrection is real. We know that it is real because it happens here and now. In the margins of our everyday lives, not in some time to come, but in this time, our time. Which is precisely the message in this morning's Gospel. And it is another significant theological difference between the synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John. Matthew, Mark and Luke tell the story of an earthly Jesus who will one day, one day in the future, deliver the kingdom of God through his own resurrection. The Kingdom is yet to come. But in John, the Kingdom is already here, on earth. Because the Kingdom is embodied in the incarnation, the life of Jesus. Jesus will not deliver the kingdom with his resurrection, Jesus IS the Kingdom. He already is the resurrection. Here and now. No lines. No waiting. No question. Not just the gift of life, but also the gift of resurrection is already here among us. How great is that?! And THIS is the part of the Gospel of John that I can see and feel and taste and touch in my own life and in this community of faithful friends, and in the wide and often dangerous world around me. The kingdom of God in here and now.

And yet, sometimes I have a hard time seeing exactly how resurrection works, on a practical and accountable scale. I know it has happened in my life. But can I/we count on it when we need it most? When we are at our wits end, stripped down to our socks, backed into the blackest hole we can imagine,

will it truly happen? Every time? Or is it a random occurrence? When and how does God step up to the plate when our lives seem at a dead end?

Josh is eight years old. He was adopted, along with his fraternal twin brother, Joey, five year ago when they were three. Josh was named Hunter then, but his adoptive parents wanted the names of all their children to start with the letter J.....J for Jesus. And so to match the divinely designated Judson and Joey, Hunter became Josh....seemingly the least of the abuses levied against the identity and belonging of this toddler since his birth. Joey and Josh had endured seven foster homes by the tender age of three. They had each suffered a host of serious wounds, dozens of broken bones, rashes of burns, and a gallery of battle scars adorned their small bodies on the occasion of their adoption.

Joey fit easily into his new family. He looked like the biological son, and he was quiet and shy and always happy to be cuddled. Josh, however, was.....not. For the last five years he has wet his bed. He regularly smears his feces on the walls. He lies....a lot. He steals....a lot. He tests, and challenges, and frustrates, and infuriates his parents.....a lot. He has been more than a handful since the day he arrived. But no more so than he was two weeks ago.

On that cold February afternoon Joey suffered a seizure of life-threatening proportions in the bathroom at his tai kwon do class. The paramedics worked furiously to revive him. He was rushed to the emergency room of a nearby hospital where by the most narrow of margins, his life was spared. But he was gravely ill. And as the doctors scratched their heads and puzzled on the cause of Joey's sudden demise, his father discovered that 12 of the clonopin pills prescribed for Josh's anxiety, were missing. The dosage for Josh was one half of one pill per day. 24 eight-year-old doses were gone. And it did not take long for Josh to spill *his* guts. He explained to his father how angry he was at Joey for constantly taking his Game Boy without permission and how jealous he was that Joey seemed to get all of the attention. And so, Josh had carefully and methodically crushed 12 of his clonopin pills into a fine powder and somehow slipped it into Joey's milk at lunch. And the only thing he was sorry about, was that his plan to kill his brother did not work. Premeditated unremorseful attempted murder of 8 year old by an 8 old.

That was two weeks ago. Today 8 year old Joey is still in serious condition, the extent of his organ damage is yet unknown. And 8 year old Josh is in a locked psyche ward with no hope whatsoever for a normal life. He can never be a trusted member of a family, a community, a society at large. He will always be a danger to himself and others. So badly abused in the first few years of his precious life, that he has no sense of restraint, responsibility, or remorse. His future is already dead.

Joey and Josh are my nephews. My brother Jeff is their adoptive father. And I cannot help but wonder, where is the resurrection and the life for them? Where is God in their hour of deepest need? If resurrection is indeed to come, what will sustain them in the meantime? And I keep going back to this morning's reading from John. For when Jesus got to the place of Lazarus' death, before he raised him...Jesus wept.

Jesus wept. As you may know, this is the shortest verse in the entire Bible. And the verb used here, is unique in the entire Bible. Nowhere else does this particular verb for "wept" occur. So we know right off the bat that this is a very special event. This is not your typical pity party. These are not your run of the mill tears. Jesus wept once. He did not weep for Jairus' dead daughter. Nor for the herd of God's beloved creature swine possessed by the demons of Legion who threw themselves into the sea...I wept, but Jesus did not weep. Nor did he weep for hundreds of other sick and dying and dead that Jesus must have encountered over the course of his ministry. He did not weep in the Garden of Gethsemane. Nor at his own crucifixion. He wept only once. He wept at the death of his friend Lazarus. But we must be careful here, Jesus knew that Lazarus would be raised. And so we must be careful not to misinterpret his tears. Jesus did not weep *for* Lazarus, he wept *with* those who wept for Lazarus, actually for those who *wailed*, as the Greek word used to describe Mary's and Martha's cries literally means. Jesus wept for the depth of suffering that comes when we are in abject pain. Jesus wept for the grief of the living not the fate of the dead.

These tears, these rare tears of our Savior, tell us of the relationship of God's deep love to the depth of human suffering and weakness. Jesus wept because, when we weep, when we wail, when we are overcome with grief, God weeps with us. And so Jesus, God on earth according to John, wept not for the loss of his friend, but for the love of humanity and the weakness and suffering that we endure as an inescapable part of our human lives. And this steadfast companionship in our common suffering is the way....it is the way Jesus himself teaches us to raise each other up. I told you the story of Joey and Josh for a number of reasons. It is weighing heavy on my heart and you are my community, and that is what we do in community. We share our stories. But also, although this story is unspeakably sad on its own merits, that fact that these boys are related to me, and thus to you, puts them in the same proximity to us as was Lazarus to Jesus. And it is this proximity that provokes our compassion. We weep as Jesus wept.

The resurrection and the life. They are inseparable. For the Evangelist John, there is no resurrection without life and no life without resurrection. And they are both grounded in the presence here and now of God among us. In more contemporary terms, Jesus might have said: I am transformation and relationship. Do you believe? And I indubitably do! For I have been raised by relationship and

transformation from the moment I stepped foot in this community, until this very last day....a phrase that is also unique in the Gospel of John, "on the very last day" -but it carries with it the wonderful realization that each day is the very last day....the first day and the last day, for Jesus, who walks among us is both the life and the resurrection, here and now.

I believe with all my heart that we are the life and the resurrection for each other. Just as Jesus and Lazarus achieved resurrection together. Yes, together. When Jesus called Lazarus back from his four day jaunt to paradise, to the land where there is no pain and no suffering, back from the heavenly rest of everlasting life – Lazarus came....Lazarus responded to God's call....as we all try to answer God's call....faithfully, honestly, and in community....The name Lazarus is a shortened version of the Semitic name El-azar, which is literally translated as "God helps" – El (God) Azar (helps). That is, God is in relationship with us, and we are called to respond, to complete the reconciliation. God cannot do God's work alone....for in the beginning there may have been but the Word, but on the very last day, there was the Relationship.

There is a concept in Celtic Spirituality called "thin places." A thin place is where we meet God. Where God calls into the caverns of our lives, "Come out!" And we do. Marcus Borg defines thin places as anywhere our hearts are opened. St. John's has been for me, a very thin place. And so my dear friends, my community, my faithful family – here with you I have been resurrected to a new life, a life that I will now take, with your blessing, to a new community. I leave you with a grateful heart and the hope that you will continue this holy work that you do so wellthe work of raising each other up from the first to the last day.

And I will remind...mostly myself, this bittersweet morning, that this story of Lazarus is witness to the truth that even when we are sure we have said our last goodbyes, God can and will call us together again. We will never be parted....for in the words of St. Benedict:
Always we begin again.

I love you dearly. I will miss you deeply. And I thank you from my toe bottoms.
In you I have seen the glory of God, and I believe!
Amen.

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