

PENTECOST II

Jesus said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise!' The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother." Luke 7: 15

Jesus makes dead people come alive! He resurrects the son of the widow of Nain, in an echo of Elijah's act in today's lesson from Kings, resurrects him and *gives him to his mother*. He brings back to life a little girl and says, *give her something to eat*. He resurrects his dear friend Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha, who, it's claimed, has been dead for three days and is beginning to stink.

Jesus makes dead people come alive! That's what these stories tell us. Do we believe them, literally? Do we believe them any way at all? Could a flesh and blood man walking around Palestine 2000 years ago actually reverse the process of death—and even decomposition? To the twenty-first century mind, it seems improbable, if not impossible. So what are we to do with these most dramatic, most over-the-top, of healing stories?

As I have said here more than once, when I was younger I didn't know what to make of Jesus of Nazareth, and to be honest I didn't make too much of him. To me, thirty years ago, it was all God. God was in Church, and Jesus was in the bible. I knew a good deal about Church – not as much as I know now, but a fair amount– and I didn't know much about the bible.

I'm still no biblical scholar. But thirty years have changed things for me.

As I've confessed before, I told my discernment committee in Belmont that Jesus was not at the center of my worship life. Amazingly enough, they passed me on in the ordination process. Perhaps because Jesus was not at the center of their worship life either; there were, as our rector told me, a lot of Unitarians in the congregation.

But maybe Jesus heard me. Maybe he said, *okay sister, you don't know who I am or what to do with me? Let me help you out here. Let me show you.*

Nothing extraordinary happened. No blinding light. No falling off a horse on the road to Damascus. Jesus, contrary to much testimony of Born Again types, Jesus can be subtle. After thirty years of study and prayer and teaching and probably most of all preaching and preparation for preaching, Jesus is front and center in my worship life.

I am intensely interested in Jesus of Nazareth. I think about him a great deal. He is much more of a familiar to me now than either God the Creator or the Holy Spirit. Familiar, and at the same time infinitely mysterious. Who was he? Who *is* he? *What*

manner of man is this, that even the wind and sea obey him? What kind of powers did he actually possess?

I was struck last Wednesday by Maureen Dowd's column in the NYTimes about Obama and the oil spill. She begins this way, *It's not a good narrative arc: The man who walked on water is now ensnared by a crisis under water.*

There's a lot of talk in the Obama presidency, and in politics generally, about narrative. That is, the story – a personal story, a political story, that's arranged artfully, like a novel, with a coherent plot and some consistent themes: multi-ethnic youth with broken family struggles against overwhelming odds, inspires millions with his message of hope and can-do, and becomes the first African American president of the U.S. That's the Obama narrative; the pre-election narrative.

I'm interested in narrative because I'm a writer and former professor of writing and literature. And because of all biblical literature – literature I know better now that I did thirty years ago– I love the gospels and their narratives best. Maureen Dowd continues,

Obama wanted to be a transformative president and now the presidency is transforming him.

Instead of buoyant, he seems put upon. Instead of the fairy dust of hopefulness, there's the bitter draught of helplessness.

His battle against water is taking on Biblical — even Job-like — proportions.

And she goes on

How does a man who invented himself as a force by writing one of the most eloquent memoirs in political history lose control of his own narrative?

In "Dreams From My Father," Obama showed passion, lyricism, empathy and an exquisite understanding of character and psychological context — all the qualities that he has stubbornly resisted showing as president. It was a book that promised a president who could see into the hearts of other people. But there's so much you don't learn about candidates in campaigns, even when they seem completely exposed.

This president has made it clear that he's not comfortable outside whatever domain he's defined. But unless he wants his story to be marred by a pattern of passivity, detachment, acquiescence and compromise, he'd better seize control of the story line of his White House years. Woe-is-me is not an attractive narrative.

The gospel writers were story tellers. They each have a story to tell, and each of them keeps a firm control of the narrative they unfold for us. Like Obama in his autobiography, they don't tell us much of the dark side of Jesus – maybe just enough to hold our interest in his true humanness when he rudely and unfairly curses a fig tree, or scolds his disciples for not understanding what they can't understand, or responding cruelly and dismissively to a Gentile woman who begs for healing for a sick child.

But if he *has woe-is-me* moments, and how could he not? they don't prevail, in the Gospel narratives, they don't swamp the story as Obama's may threaten to swamp his. The Gospel writers tell us about the domains of Jesus that they've defined for themselves – each of them distinct and different, each with major points of agreement. And they don't stray, often or wildly, outside those domains.

Mostly, the gospel writers want to paint – and do paint – a multifaceted but consistent picture of Jesus: he's a teacher, preacher, a healer, and an activist. He rebels against unreasonable and restrictive religious laws. He confronts corruption boldly. He commands loyalty to a cause that seems incomprehensible and quixotic. He feels very close to God.

All this we can believe, all this is plausible, is human. Is possible. But what about, what about these stories of raising folk from the dead? Really, what's that all about? What are we to believe about them?

You have heard me say, about the story of Jesus' own Resurrection, that I believe something happened so powerful that the only way his followers could describe or explain it was with the image of a dead person returning to the living. I think the same thing about these other stories, these mini-resurrections if you will, these run-ups to the big one, the Resurrection of Jesus – I believe that they are images or metaphors or parables.

And what are they meant to tell us? They are illustrations of Jesus' extraordinary powers of healing. Jesus made people better. At the very least, he made them *feel* better. And if they *felt* better they *were* better, in some part of themselves, they were somehow healed, somehow more whole.

As I was thinking about the Lazarus story this time around, the line I quoted before that *the body has a bad odor* (a more polite translation than *stink*) it occurred to me that Lazarus had been in the tomb for 4 days, and his sisters had not anointed him with the oil that would have disguised the stench of decomposition. The story

of Lazarus appears in John's gospel, and John makes Mary, Lazarus's sister, the woman who anoints Jesus with expensive oil – in John's version, much earlier than all this with Lazarus.

So the family wasn't short of oil! Why had they neglected this very basic and honorable practice? Because they were waiting for Jesus. They had faith, or trust, that when Jesus came he would make Lazarus better. The very expectation of Jesus' arrival made Mary and Martha feel better, feel well enough even in the midst of grief and terror at the loss of their brother that they could hold out hope for his recovery – his resurrection.

Jesus brings people back to life. What that looked like, 2000 years ago, in physical terms, we will never know. But if the Gospels tell us anything about this man, this Child of God, it is that he made people well. He made them better. He brought people back to life, brought them to new life.

That's what he's done for me, after all. Over time, gradually but firmly, he has lifted me out of a preoccupation with God in the Church into another life, a life of companionship with the messenger and instrument of God's compassion, God's freedom, God's passion for justice. He has resurrected me.

And that's what he promises us all, my dear friends, that's what he promises us all.

Alleluia! Amen

