

"He Is Alive"

It is true that people respond differently to impending death – and even to the reality of death itself. Some deny it, some blame others, and some deal with death by giving in to despair. How devastating it is to commit to something, or to someone, to invest one's time, one's heart and soul, one's best effort, one's love, and then to have the person or the enterprise die. Why go on?"<sup>12</sup>

In the gospel of John, the story of Lazarus functions as a parable of the Christian life. Whatever its basis in history, John writes it as an accident which Jesus explicitly uses to teach those he loves, as well as those standing by, the meaning of belief in God, and in God's reveler, himself. Many of the strange little touches in the story would make no sense if this were not an object lesson. Why would Jesus wait two extra days before responding to the urgent call to the bedside of Lazarus if he did not want to remove any doubt that the man was really dead? Why would he pray to God, "I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me?" This is an acted out parable which, a "sign story" is designed to impart more than is on the immediate surface.

It is, on the face of it, a story about an encounter with death. The beloved brother of Mary and Martha has contracted a lethal illness. Knowing Jesus, their friend, to be a healer, an urgent summons goes out to him. He, however, dallying with his disciples, delays his arrival on the scene until after Lazarus is dead. Then Jesus has both bereaved sisters to contend with, as well as a veritable Greek chorus of friends and neighbors, loosely described as the Jews.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from <http://day1.org/907>

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from *Why?* By Anne Graham Lotz

"He Is Alive"

In the course of the story, Jesus encounters several of the attitudes toward death I described earlier. It may be unfair to the disciples to accuse them of denial because Jesus was cryptic in the manner he imparted information to them, but, at least at first, they didn't realize the seriousness of Lazarus' situation. If he was asleep, they said, he would be all right. What the disciples did seem to realize, however, was the seriousness of Jesus' situation, and theirs too, if they stuck with him. Like a deep bass chord running under the melody of the story, is another motif -- the building sense of danger to Jesus' own life.

Martha, though gently, seems to be rebuking Jesus, blaming him for not arriving in time to save her brother. Perhaps she is also into a little denial ~ hoping against hope that, even now, if Jesus really wanted to he could do something to change the situation.

It is at this point in the story that the parable delivers its message. Jesus said to Martha, "Your brother will rise again." Martha responds in much the same manner that bereaved believers have ever since, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection of the last day." The unspoken implication then and now is: that's not good enough. Don't tell me that time will take care of my grief, I am in pain now. I cannot imagine living through today, or tomorrow, without this one I love, never mind waiting for reunion in the life to come. How can I endure this loss and go on? How can life have any meaning for me now? And 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?" Those who believe in Jesus Christ, even though they die physically, will live

"He Is Alive"

spiritually, and everyone who lives spiritually and believes in him will never die spiritually. This is the message for now; for today and all the days after the loss of someone or something we loved.

There is also, on another level, another message: Those who believe in Jesus Christ, even though they die physically, will, in the last days, be raised with him to eternal life. There is a message for now, and a message for later. And neither message cancels out the other. We look forward to, in the world of the funeral service, ~ "glad reunion in the life to come," while at one and the same time, we look forward to tomorrow, even in a world of death, to live in relationship to our risen Lord. Do you believe this? Martha responded to the question in faith ~ even before she had the sign in her brother's raising ~ "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Having delivered its message, the parable moves on to demonstrate by what means Jesus intends to make good his word. Before that happens, however, there are more bereaved people to encounter.

Mary and her comforters now come to meet Jesus. From Mary there is the same hint of rebuke as from Martha, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." But there is none of the hope, even if unrealistic, that Martha exhibited. Mary is in tears. So devastating was Mary's grief that Jesus too, began to weep. The question is often raised about Jesus' tears; if he knew he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead, what was there to weep about? One explanation offered is that Jesus, by now, knew his own death was imminent and was crying over that. Another suggestion is that he was saddened by the lack of faith he saw around

"He Is Alive"

him. I think both explanations try to use logic to explain a story which, in the way it is told, has more in common with a symbol than with history. If this is a parable of the Christian life, the message is that Christians have to face a lot of death in the course of living. While death does not have the power, for a believer, to wipe out meaning, or to end spiritual life, it is, nevertheless excruciatingly painful to lose someone, or something, we love. It is appropriate to weep under such circumstances; it is healthy to weep under such circumstances; and, rather than rebuke Mary for her tears, Jesus joins right in with them. Just as, I believe, Jesus weeps over every one of our losses, every one of our disappointments, every one of our failures. This is not a denial of death; it is an acknowledgment of its reality. Those watching Jesus were divided in their assessment of his tears; some thought them a mark of how much he had loved Lazarus; others thought them rather hypocritical for, had he not, after all, failed to show up in time to rescue the situation?

Then it is that Jesus, as well as the other characters in the story, faces the harsh truth of the situation. They go to the tomb. There is nothing pretty about death. No matter how much we try to dress it up with cosmetology and satin lined caskets; no matter how ghostly we try to make things look, death is decay. In this story it is Martha who straightforwardly speaks the truth, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." No euphemisms for Martha, she says it just like that.

Standing at the site of the tomb, a cave with a stone lying against it, we suddenly have a case of *deja vu*. Wait a minute, what story is this? It is not Easter

"He Is Alive"

yet, is it? Haven't we heard this story before, only with a different corpse and a different cast of characters? In a flash, the underlying theme breaks through the surface of the story and we suddenly understand how it is that Jesus intends to assure his promise to Martha ~ and by extension, to all of us, believers. By coming to Bethany to raise Lazarus, Jesus was risking his own death, by calling Lazarus out of the tomb, Jesus was assuring his own death. This was one sign too many for the Jewish religious establishment. This revelation of God in the person of God's Christ was enough to push them over the edge. Too many people were being convinced; the whole Judaism was in danger, and Judaism was in precarious enough a position in an occupied land.

As Jesus screamed into the tomb, "Lazarus, come out!" we understand that what Jesus intends is to take Lazarus' place. Not literally, of course, because, even though raised, we must assume that Lazarus will eventually die again, physically, but by dying as even believers die, and by being raised by God, Jesus allows us to be raised with him to eternal life. Knowing that death is not the last word, we are free to live; we can stare death in the face without flinching; we can embrace its reality as a part of earthly living, even with our grief, even with our pain.

Lazarus, even as we Christians whom he clearly represents in the story, comes stumbling out of the tomb with a new lease on life. But he, like we, too often, is still dragging around with him the wrappings of death, He who has experienced dying cannot yet quite experience living. This gift which he has received through Jesus Christ is not real to him. He is still bound by old expectations, still blinded by inauthentic ways of seeing reality.

"He Is Alive"

But Jesus had one more gift to offer, and that was the gift of community. To those standing by, who had seen the acted out sign of God's glory and believed, he gave the task of unbinding Lazarus, of loosing him from the past and helping him to claim the freedom of a new life in Christ. That is the work of the church. We still live in a world of death. We lose people, we lose jobs we lose institutions, but if we claim the gift of new life which Jesus offers us, we will never die spiritually. We will live each day in hope and be willing again and again, even though it hurts, to invest ourselves in people, and work, and love, knowing it is the only way to truly live.