

3/9/08: Last Sunday of Lent – Elizabeth Prevost

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

Today's gospel reading tells of the pivotal moment which connects Jesus' ministry of healing, which we have been hearing about these past weeks, and his Passion, which we will begin to follow next Sunday. The story of Lazarus is a familiar one for many Christians, but even if we know how the story ends, it does not take away from its power and drama. The episode is gripping in & of itself, but it also provides a narrative and symbolic turning point in the larger progression of John's gospel. The increasingly public and spectacular nature of Jesus' miracles has put him on the wrong side of the authorities, to such an extent that the disciples already fear for his life. The raising of Lazarus could be considered the point of no return, for it sets the events in motion which will culminate in the mystery foreshadowed by the miracle in Bethany: Jesus' own death and resurrection.

Jesus himself plays a role in this mounting tension, choreographing each step of the drama with care and purpose. I have to admit that the Jesus of John's gospel often strikes me as irritatingly self-aware and clairvoyant. He is always in control, always knows what's coming and what purpose it will serve, always calmly resigned to the part he has to play in fulfilling that purpose. Here, too, Jesus seems assured of the outcome before it has happened, and he even delays the pace for maximum effect.

Jesus' followers, however, do not know how it will end. Martha seems a little ahead of the game, but the overwhelming attitude Jesus encounters is grief and incomprehension at the premature loss of a brother and friend. This loss was made all the more real by the time that had elapsed – his corpse had decayed, and Jewish belief held that his spirit would have departed the body after three days. Martha and Mary's sense of loss was compounded because they felt it was avoidable: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." "If": that poignant word of human longing. If only God would override our imperfect human natures and actions to make it come out right. We can easily identify with the mourners' question, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" He got his miracle, so where is mine? If God has the power to do something, why doesn't he? "Lord, if you had been here..."

But then everything changes in an instant when Jesus declares God's power over death. Martha expresses her hope that Lazarus will be raised again at the last day, but Jesus tells her that the resurrection is already in their midst: "I am the resurrection and the life: he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live." And to show emphatically that these were not empty words of comfort, Lazarus responds to Jesus' loud call by emerging from the tomb. Through words and wonders, Jesus assures those who mourn that they already know how the story ends, and not just in the next life, but in the present one as well.

On the face of it then, the message of the story sounds like a simple case of cause & effect. Lazarus and his family had faith, and their faith got results. So apparently the outcome is not just up to God after all, but up to us. God's call is live-giving, if only we have the faith to accept it. How daunting for those of us of feeble faith! So much gets in the way. For one thing, in my experience, faith does not amount to cause & effect. I can name a number of things I prayed for this week that didn't happen. On the flip side, I can name a number of things I didn't pray for that did happen. But the implications of this gospel message can also be taken in a more troubling direction: If faith has the power to bring someone back, did we lose someone because they or we did not have sufficient faith? I don't think so, but will logic allow for one without the other? Furthermore, we hear that those who had the good fortune to observe the miracle in Bethany were inspired to lives of faith themselves. They had proof, but how many of us have seen someone raised from the dead? Perhaps we have; for me, it is no less spectacular when someone who has flatlined in the ER is shocked back to life. Yet for every example which indicates God's life-giving power in the world, there is another which could be interpreted as proving the opposite. Again, the logic doesn't cut both ways; the "if" remains.

Is there room for faith in a culture that puts such a premium on rationality, sure knowledge, and proof? The desire for tangible assurance is not just a product of the modern world – as we've seen, the Jesus of John's gospel understood the importance of evidence. And he also understood that

affliction, loss, and death are very, very real. The pain of Lazarus' death was apparently so all-consuming that Jesus himself was overcome by the loss of his friend and the grief of those he left behind. Despite the careful choreography, Jesus wept openly when confronted with death's sting.

The closer the encounter with death, the more difficult it is to see it all in perspective and to order it according to some logical explanation. In those moments, the only thing left is faith. In one of her scriptural reflections, Madeleine L'Engle asks:

Does enjoying my faith imply protection from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune? No. It did not stop my husband from dying prematurely. It did not stop a careless truck driver from going through a red light and nearly killing me. My faith is not a magic charm, like garlic to chase away vampires. It is, instead, what sustains me in the midst of all the normal joys and tragedies of the ordinary human life. It is faith that helps my grief to be creative, not destructive. It is faith that kept me going through the pain at the very portals of death and pulled me, whether I would or no, back into life and whatever work still lies ahead.¹

Indeed, the evangelist's message is not that people of faith get everything they ask for. Instead, a life of faith means surrendering ourselves to God's care and trusting that it will sustain us in life as well as in death. It means daring to hope that when our relationships or communities or physical persons become valleys of dry bones, God has the power to breathe new life into them. Faith means answering that big "IF" in the affirmative, as Paul does in his letter to the Romans: "If Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead...your spirits are alive... If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from

¹ Madeleine L'Engle, *The Rock that is Higher: Story as Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1993), 176.

the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you.”

Faith, not logic, allows us to believe the good news that life dwells in us and among us, and that life ultimately wins out. That doesn't mean that death isn't traumatic and painful and often undignified. This, in fact, is the point – for we cannot experience the resurrection without experiencing death as a reality. Death is real, but it is not absolute. Death is not how the story ends.

Amen.