

Seeing Life and Death

John 11:1-7, 17-28, 33- 44

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

March 21, 2021

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When we hear the word resurrection, Christians tend to think of the Easter story, of Jesus' resurrection. In fact, so much so that many Christians don't even realize that it is not the only resurrection story in the Bible.

Today we hear the story of another resurrection. This one not *of* Jesus, but *by* Jesus.

And if you want to pause here and ask if Lazarus was really dead, let us note that the writer of the Gospel of John goes to great lengths to make sure we understand this not to be a resuscitation, but a resurrection.

In fact, when we hear Martha say, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days," we might get caught up thinking about the stench, but good Jewish people of Jesus' time would have known that while there was a belief that a person's spirit stayed around for three days, therefore allowing the possibility of resuscitation until then, four days meant Lazarus was dead-dead.

So, the most common thing that we do with this story is to celebrate the miraculous power of Jesus. We read this story and we say, "Well, if they didn't already know that he was the Messiah, they should figure it out now."

We read this story and we see one more piece of evidence that Jesus is the Christ.

We read this story, and honestly, from where we sit...because we have heard these stories time and time again...because everything we hear is in retrospect with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight...we don't even really question whether or not Jesus can do this. And too often we don't spend time talking about its meaning.

But if all we do is read this as a miracle story, neatly placed in the gospel to remind us again who Jesus is, then we are short changing it. We are neglecting to deal with all that is here.

Because this is not *just* a story about Jesus being the Messiah, the Christ, the most amazing miracle worker who ever walked. This is not *just* a story about Jesus being divine. It is very much a story about him being human. It is a story that gives value to the human experiences of loving friendships and of deep grief.

While love comes up often in the Gospel of John, it is seldom mentioned in relationship to particular individuals. And yet, this story begins with friendships rooted in deep love. When Mary and Martha send a message to Jesus to alert him about Lazarus' health, they say, "The one whom you love is ill." It is clear that while this story becomes

one that offers proof of who Jesus is, it is first a story of a man who had a friend about whom he cared deeply and for whom he would do anything he could.

And, let us not minimize the risk that Jesus took by even responding. Again, so often our attention goes to Jesus' delay and we wonder, as Mary and Martha did, why he didn't get there more quickly. And yet, if we read what has happened just before this, Jesus had recently left Judea because he was considered a threat. In fact, in chapter 10 we hear that people had tried to stone him and had tried to arrest him.

So, in verses we did not read today - after all we only read selected verses from this story - the disciples remind Jesus that if he goes to Bethany, only two miles outside of Jerusalem, he may be going to save Lazarus or to comfort his sisters, but he will also be risking his life.

There is nothing simple in this story. As is so often true in our own lives, things are complicated. Jesus loves Lazarus and he loves Mary and Martha. He wants to be there and he can't safely be there. He knows that he will be able to help Lazarus live and it is likely, although he doesn't explicitly name it here, that he knows that doing so will lead to his own death. This also means that while his response is an intimate response between friends...it also has to matter in bigger ways, it has to offer evidence to others of the power of God.

Because here in this story life and death intersect in so many ways.

The story begins with grief, grief that wasn't just a prop for a bigger purpose but that was real for Mary and Martha, for the community, and for Jesus. Grief, that didn't just disappear when Lazarus came out of the tomb, but an experience of grief that lived with each of them for years to come and that informed how they experienced both life and death.

This story reminds us that life and death are not binaries that live on opposite sides of a great divide, but that life and death co-mingle and that we often live with one foot in each. We see this illustrated in so many ways in our own lives - when a grandparent dies just as a new child is being born into the family; when we grieve a person we will miss even though we give them permission to die and know that death is not the worst thing; when in a butterfly or a rainbow, a bird or a song the presence of a loved one comes back to us and enters the day's reality. This story reminds us that life and death are closer than we even have words to describe, and that God is in the midst of both.

And this is a story that reminds us of the connection between life and death as we watch Jesus' act of raising Lazarus then become the final straw that moves him toward his own death. After all, if we continue reading through this chapter we get to verse 53 which reads, "So from that day on they planned to put him to death" (11:53, NRSV). In acknowledging this reality, we also acknowledge that it is here on his journey to the cross "where Jesus is most impossibly, lovingly life-giving" (Meda Stamper, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-111-45>).

Friends, in this story, life and death meet in so many ways. In this story we celebrate Lazarus' new life even as we grieve Jesus' path to the cross.

In this story we are nudged to not only admire Jesus' action, but to be engaged in our own world in ways that are life giving, even when they mean risk for us. Remember, while it was Jesus who we credit with the resurrection, who called Lazarus from the tomb, he then turned to the community and asked them to engage. "Unbind him, and let him go," Jesus said to those around him (John 11:44b, NRSV).

In this story we are reminded that as those who follow in the ways of Jesus, we have a roll in giving life in its fullness to others.

Life and death, they are more deeply connected than we even know. And Jesus is in the midst of the both. May we have hearts open to see life when death overwhelms, to grief honestly and offer comfort to others in theirs, and follow Jesus not only in the joys of this life but when the way he walks leads to the cross.

Amen.