

Lazarus, Come Out!

It is a well-known story. Such a well-known story, in fact, that some of the commentaries and sermons I read this week seemed to grasp at straws for something new and interesting to say about it. Other writers shrugged their metaphorical shoulders and threw up their literary hands. “Stick to the tried and true or use one of the other lectionary passages,” was their implicit message. Of course, for a relatively new pastor like me, almost anything I preach will be new from my mouth, even if it’s old to your ears. But let us wander through this old story together, you and I, and see what we might learn from its well-trod paths.

Almost invariably, upon hearing this tale of Jesus and his friends, one’s mind will turn to thoughts of what a comfort the story and its promise is to those who are grieving. Perhaps we are preconditioned to associate this passage with the grieving process from its long-time usage in funeral services. The words of Jesus which begin, “I am the resurrection and the life,” have appeared in “the order for the burial of the dead” in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer since its very first edition in 1549. This great work of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer is not only used throughout the Anglican Communion but has influenced the services of all English-speaking Protestants, even Baptists. The passage occurs in one-third of the sample funeral services given by Rev. J.R. Hobbs in The Pastor’s Manual, that venerable little volume still published by Broadman Press in Nashville for the use of neophyte ministers. The connection between our passage this morning and funerary rites, therefore, is quite natural.

It is natural for us to make the connection but is it appropriate? It is my contention this morning that although there is certainly very real comfort in this passage for the bereaved, there are other things to be learned as well. The author of the Fourth Gospel has laced this passage with a good deal of ironic commentary that should make us pause and take another look. And there is not only comfort in Jesus’ words and actions from that day in Bethany but also challenge and calling to us as his followers.

The idea that ironic commentary can be found in John’s Gospel is scarcely original to me. One of my former professors, Alan Culpepper, writes on the idea in his book, Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel. The concept of irony in John’s Gospel was also used as a doctoral dissertation by one of my former pastors, Paul Duke, who later expanded his writings into a book, Irony in the Fourth Gospel. Not much irony or originality in that title, Paul. Webster’s tells us that irony is “a method of humorous or subtly sarcastic expression in which the intended meaning of the words used is the direct opposite of their usual sense; a combination of circumstances or a result that is the opposite of what is or might be expected or considered appropriate.” Culpepper contributes a more human definition. “The implied author smiles, winks, and raises his eyebrows as the story is told. The reader who sees as well as hears understands that the narrator means more than he says and that the characters do not understand what is happening or what they are saying.” Culpepper and Duke give many examples of this type of writing in John but I want to pick out a few in this morning’s passage.

The phrases I have in mind come early in our story. One of them is pretty blatant; John even calls attention to it. After delaying their departure for Bethany by two days, Jesus says to the disciples, “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

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them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead...’” Jesus knows a truth beyond what the disciples know. Lazarus only sleeps, for in the Kingdom of God, there is no death. We will return to this idea shortly. But for the sake of telling the disciples the news in a paradigm they can understand, Jesus restates the facts: Lazarus, to human eyes, is dead. Jesus’ announcement that he sleeps is ironic to the disciples for it hides a truth that is beyond their comprehension; Jesus has said the opposite of what he means in their understanding. I suspect that John points this out to his audience because the use of the term, “falling asleep” for the end of the believer’s earthly life had become commonplace for followers of The Way. Paul uses it in one of his earliest letters, I Thessalonians, without comment, obviously confident that it will be understood.

There is also a certain irony in the words of Thomas as Jesus and the disciples prepare to travel to Bethany from Transjordan. The disciples are worried about this trip. As they point out, Jesus’ opponents had tried to stone him the last time he was in Judea. Thomas is outspoken in rallying the disciples to Jesus’ side. “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” But Jesus does not die on this trip. Indeed, immediately after the resurrection of Lazarus, his popularity may be greater than ever. But in the aftermath of the miracle, as we may read in the remainder of chapter 11 and the opening verses of chapter 12, the Sanhedrin decides that Jesus must die for the sake of the nation (a truly ironic decision) and that the recipient of the miracle, Lazarus, must die as well, lest he continue to be a witness to Jesus’ divine power. And, of course, when those who seek earthly power spring their trap on Jesus, the disciples scatter and flee, even the formerly resolute Thomas. Thomas’ stubborn streak is better remembered for a later pronouncement of lack of faith (“Unless I see the marks of the nails”) than for these words of bravery. We may still call someone “Doubting Thomas” but never “Courageous Thomas.”

But perhaps the greatest example of irony in this passage comes when Jesus first hears of Lazarus’ illness. Jesus 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.” The ironic nature of the first clause should be obvious to us. Of course Lazarus’ illness led to death in the normal, human sense. He was sick and he died. But Jesus is speaking of Lazarus’ continued life in the Kingdom of God. As one who has believed in Jesus as the Messiah of God, Lazarus will not know spiritual death. But the irony of the end of Jesus’ statement, that the Son of God will be glorified, is a little harder to catch. If we were to read carefully in the next two chapters of John, first as Jesus speaks about his impending death in 12:20-36 and then as he gives his friends the new commandment of love in 13:31-35, it would become clear that when Jesus speaks of his own glorification, he is not using the word in a way that makes sense in our human understanding of glory; quite the opposite in fact. When Jesus foresees glory, he foresees the cross; the least glorious, most humiliating death ever conceived by humans. In human terms, Lazarus’ illness not only led to his own death, it led to Jesus’ death as well. The miracle of Lazarus’ raising galvanized the powerful in Judea to seek Jesus’ death and they succeeded. But the ultimate success of Jesus was something they could not and did not foresee. Through his death on the cross and subsequent resurrection, Jesus was indeed glorified as the only begotten Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.

It is in this overpowering of death by life that we find the strain of comfort so well-attested in this story. We don’t necessarily find our comfort in the kind of resurrection that Jesus performed on Lazarus. Miracles of that sort are now almost commonplace as the plethora of near-death

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experiences investigated by some of our friends attests. Like the villagers of Bethany or Miracle Max in “The Princess Bride,” we understand the difference between “mostly dead and all dead. Mostly dead is slightly alive. With all dead, well, with all dead there’s usually only one thing you can do... Go through his clothes and look for loose change.” And, like Westley, in that same movie, we understand that “Death cannot stop true love. All it can do is delay it for a while.” Jesus, the self-revelation of God who is True Love, said to Martha, “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.” When we who are followers of the Christ face death in our lives, we know that in the Kingdom of God, life always conquers death. We see a hint of that great and beautiful truth in the story of Lazarus and we see it stronger yet in the Risen Christ of Easter. Through Christ Jesus, death and our fear of it have been laid to rest.

I read a sermon this week by John Claypool that cited a play I once thought of producing but quickly abandoned. The play is “Lazarus Laughed” by Eugene O’Neill. O’Neill was one of our greatest American playwrights and one of my favorites. Among my most vivid memories of theatre-going are the ground-breaking production of O’Neill’s “Long Days Journey Into Night” on Broadway, directed by Jonathan Miller and starring Jack Lemon, Kevin Spacey, Peter Gallaher and Bethel Leslie, and the excellent regional production of “A Moon for the Misbegotten” at Actors Theatre of Louisville. But “Lazarus Laughed” is nearly unproduceable, having received its only major production in 1928, on Broadway by Pasadena Community Playhouse. For one thing, it requires well over 100 actors (the Broadway production used 151), nearly all equipped with Greek masks. It’s also long and difficult. Billboard’s critic, H.O. Stechan, writing on that Broadway production, called it, “heavily freighted with philosophical subtleties and long speeches.” But it contains a remarkable interpretation of the Lazarus story and the Good News of Jesus by a playwright not normally associated with themes of hope and joy.

In O’Neill’s vision, the restored and unbound Lazarus greets Jesus and his family by beginning to laugh, as one of the witnesses says, “like a man in love with God! Such a laugh I never heard! It made my ears drunk! It was like wine! And though I was half-dead with fright I found myself laughing, too!” Life in Bethany becomes a joyous party with Lazarus’ infectious laughter spreading throughout the village. Upon catching their breaths, some of the villagers begin to ask, “Lazarus, tell us what it’s like to die. What lies on the other side of this boundary that none of us have crossed? What is beyond?” Lazarus replies joyously, “There is no death, really. There is only life. There is only God. There is only incredible joy. Death is not the way it appears from this side. Death is not an abyss into which we go into chaos. It is, rather, a portal through which we move into everlasting growth and everlasting life. The One that meets us there is the same generosity that gave us our lives in the beginning, the One who gave us our birth. Not because we deserved it but because that generous One wanted us to be and therefore there is nothing to fear in the next realm. The grave is as empty as a doorway is empty. It is a portal through which we move into greater and finer life. Therefore, there is nothing to fear. Our great agenda is to learn to accept, to learn to trust. We are put here to learn to love more fully. There is only life. There is no death.” And his laughter resumes. Ultimately, in the play, Lazarus sees his parents, his sisters and his beloved wife pass through that door to everlasting growth and everlasting life with the generous One. He himself succumbs to physical death at the end of the play at the

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hands of the monster emperor, Caligula Caesar. But his joy and his laughter, the gifts of his friend, Jesus, are never broken.

Like Martha, who confessed, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world;” like laughing Lazarus, we, too, may look forward to everlasting life in Jesus and the resurrection at the last day. The comfort this promise brings us is important, for all of us have touched by grief, by the loss of loved ones whom we hope to see again. But as I said at the outset, there is challenge and calling to us in this passage as well as comfort.

First, there is the call to us to rise from the dead places in our lives. VanThanh Nguyen of the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago writes, “Jesus also cries out to each one of us to “come out” of our darkness and fear so that we might truly live in perfect union with Jesus as he is with the Father.” As long as we are tied to death, to old habits, to old grudges, to the selfish and broken dreams and ideas and actions that taint our relationships and cloud our days, then we are at least in part with Lazarus in that tomb. Jesus calls us to come out. It doesn’t matter to him if we, in good old King James language, “stinketh.” He loves us anyway and wants us to come out and join in resurrected life that we can enjoy now, the abundant life of participating in the life of Jesus as his Body in this place, doing the will of the Father, just as Jesus did.

That is Jesus’ call to us as individuals, the call to abundant life now. But there is a call to us as a community, as well, just as there was to the people of Bethany. As each of us individually answers the call of Jesus to come out of our self-made tombs, to join him in the abundant life and laughter that is life in God, we will stagger and creep; still encumbered with the grave clothes we have been lying in for so long. That is where the Church must act. Jesus said to the crowd of mourners in Bethany, “Unbind him, and let him go.” Jesus says to us, “Look around you, Good Shepherd. Look for that brother or sister who is bound by the remnants of death. Unbind them and let them go. Sit and listen to them, when they need an ear. Make sure they know that you have forgiven them if they hurt you. Be sure they know that they are loved, by me and by you, for you are now my Body on Earth. Help them see the tatters of shroud they still carry with them and help them with love to let it go, throw it away.”

Here in this community of faith, this Body of Christ, we meet the One who heals us by his touch, who holds us in his care, who meets us with his grace. Here in this community of hope, we experience the love of God, who is on our side; our best, our heavenly friend. Our great redeemer has forgiven us from all our iniquities and offers us the gift of life; not just beyond the grave, not just in the heavenly realm, not just “pie in the sky by and by when we die,” but abundant life right now, right here in the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community. Jesus is calling to us, “Good Shepherd, come out! Good Shepherd, unbind each other and be free.” Free to follow our Lord, free to do the will of God, free to love each other and all those whom God puts in our path. Free to care for the least of these, the poor, the old, the sick, the frightened. For once we lived in fear, but now we live in the sure and certain promise of the resurrection. Now life is ours. Thanks be to God!