

Discipleship in the Lectionary - 03/26/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, March 26th

John 11:1-45

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Jesus brings things back to life

The Gospel lection for this Fifth Sunday in Lent is the seventh and final sign of Jesus detailed in John's Gospel. This is the most significant of the seven signs: Jesus calls Lazarus from death to life. Just like all the signs in John's Gospel, varying degrees of tragedy are used as an opportunity to demonstrate God's glory so that we may believe. As Christians we know that suffering does not have the last word. No matter the nature of the tragedy happening in the world, whether a personal suffering such as the man born blind, a family tragedy such as the official's son who was ill, or a community-wide tragedy such as the death of Lazarus, God can use such tragedies to accomplish His purpose and achieve greater good. As Christians, Jesus calls us from spiritual death to a new abundant life in the present along with the promise of the future eternal life. We are the messengers of this hope in a fallen world that sometimes has difficulty in seeing beyond the many tragedies that infect our daily lives. Where the world sees only fear and death, we see the opportunity for new life. We are no strangers to death and resurrection.

John 11:1-45 Commentary

The raising of Lazarus is the last and greatest of the seven signs in John. The other six are (1) changing water into wine at Cana (2:1-11), (2) the healing of the official's son (4:46-54), (3) the healing of an invalid (5:1-9), (4) the feeding of the five thousand (6:1-14), (5) walking on water (6:15-25) and (6) giving sight to a man born blind (9:1-12). The importance of the story of Lazarus is clear. First, it is the precipitating event of the plot to kill Jesus (11:46-53). Second, more text is dedicated to this final sign than the others. Third, while the previous signs are paired geographically (two in Cana, two in Galilee and two in Jerusalem), the final sign is the only one to occur in Bethany. Fourth, there are both parallels and contrasts between this story and the death and resurrection of Jesus.

¹ Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill.

The identity of and location are clearly revealed. The event in v.2 is detailed in 12:1-8 in which Jesus describes this event as an anointing for His burial.

³ So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴ But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

The faith of Mary and Martha is reflected in how simply informing Jesus of Lazarus' condition is sufficient. They do not specifically ask Him to come - although perhaps this is implied. It is ironic that the glory of God is revealed in Jesus raising Lazarus that itself leads to Jesus' death (11:46-53) which itself also reveals the glory of God.

⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Why did Jesus delay? One thought is that even if Jesus had left immediately, Lazarus would have already died based on the travel time and chronology. Jesus has already stated the purpose for what unfolds is God's glory. It was important that there was absolutely no doubt of Lazarus' death in order that the full extent of God's glory is revealed. If Jesus had simply cured Lazarus when he heard of his illness or even raised him from the dead from afar, God's glory would not have been revealed. Even though Jesus loves Martha, Mary and Lazarus, Jesus' godly purpose transcends (v.4).

⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸ The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. ¹⁰ But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." ¹¹ After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." ¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." ¹³ Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶ So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

After the intentional two-day delay, Jesus wants to set out for Bethany and thus enter again into Judea where only recently the Jewish leaders had tried to stone Jesus (10:31-39). We get to know Thomas as one who is a doubter of Jesus (20:24-29). While Thomas here also displays a lack of faith in Jesus by his pessimistic view on what is going to happen, he is also the first disciple who openly expresses his willingness to die for Jesus. Where Thomas may yet lack faith, his courage and outspokenness are beyond doubt.

¹⁷ Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.

The Jews believed the soul remained around the body for three days. The fact the text reflects Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days removes any possibility to the original audience that Lazarus was not dead. This is the definition of hopelessness.

¹⁸ Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. ²⁰ So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

In John's Gospel, "the Jews" often refers to Jewish leaders. Martha expresses her belief in Jesus and that God will work through Him - yet see v.39. Martha is confused and assumes Jesus is referring to the resurrection on the last

day. Jesus corrects her by revealing the heart of this Gospel's message: vv.25-26. This one of the seven "I am" (*ego eimi*) statements in John that reveal Jesus' true identity. The "I am" is a reference to the "I AM" of Exodus 3:14 - God's name revealed to Moses. Martha responds with the fullest confession of faith in this Gospel (v.27).

²⁸ *When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you."* ²⁹ *And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him.* ³⁰ *Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him.* ³¹ *When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there.* ³² *Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* ³³ *When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.* ³⁴ *And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see."* ³⁵ *Jesus wept.* ³⁶ *So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"* ³⁷ *But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"*

While Mary is privately informed Jesus had arrived nearby, the crowd of mourners follow Mary assuming she is going to weep at the tomb. Mary falls at His feet and laments to Jesus (v.32). When Jesus observes the weeping (*klaiousan* -the type of weeping and unrestrained sobbing and wailing that was a custom of mourning at that time) of both Mary and the crowds, He is moved emotionally. *Jesus wept (edakrysen)*. The shortest verse in the Bible has Jesus expressing grief differently than Mary and the crowds. Note the different Greek word translated into English. A more literal translation could be "Jesus shed tears." Even here Jesus has His detractors in the crowd (v.37).

³⁸ *Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it.* ³⁹ *Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days."* ⁴⁰ *Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"* ⁴¹ *So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me.* ⁴² *I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me."* ⁴³ *When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out."* ⁴⁴ *The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."*

⁴⁵ *Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him,*

Martha's belief expressed earlier is put to the test. She questions Jesus' decision to take away the stone from the tomb and Jesus admonishes her (v.40). Martha and Mary would have had to have given their permission to have the stone of the tomb removed. Jesus' prayer does not request Lazarus is brought back from the dead but is a thanksgiving for the prayer already being heard ("*I and the Father are one*" [17:11,21]). This public prayer is for the purposes of the belief of others. Jesus calls Lazarus by name to come out of the tomb. Lazarus comes out wearing grave wrappings. Unlike when Jesus was resurrected and left His grave clothes in the grave having no further use for them, one day Lazarus will need such wrappings again. Lazarus' death was temporary and so will be his physical life. However, Jesus also offers eternal life. Not surprisingly, many of the Jews believe in Jesus as a result of this sign.

Reflections

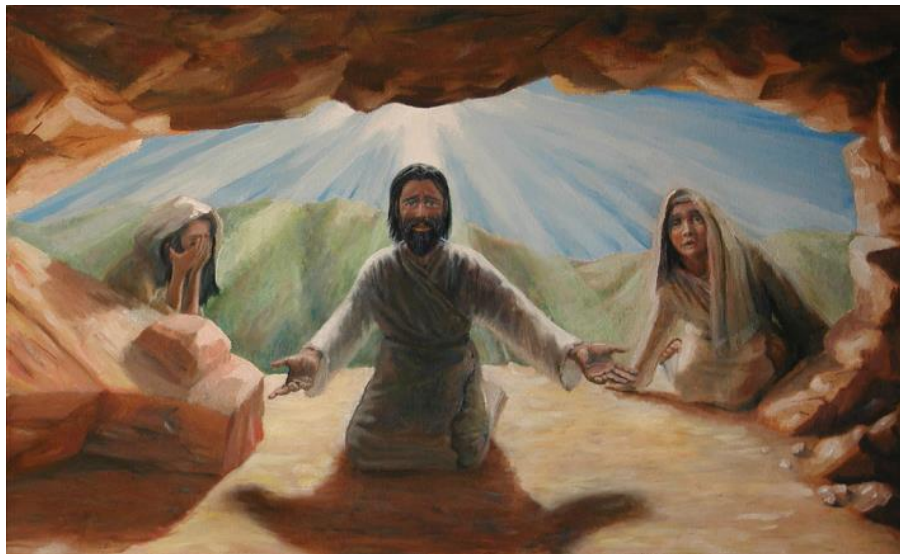
There is one thing missing in the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead. We read about the sobbing and wailing of the crowds in utter despair, but what about the inevitable celebration afterwards? One can only

imagine! So why is it that there is no account of the celebration at the miracle of Lazarus being called back to life? Perhaps this is because the raising of Lazarus to life is not the point of the story but only a sign to the ultimate point - to believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life; that Jesus is the source of eternal life. Maybe Lazarus outlived his sisters, but somebody would have had to re-wrap him in grave cloth at some point in the not-too-distant future.

I dare say that many of us are like Martha in this story. We both believe yet we don't believe. Like Martha, we believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Him, though they die, yet shall they live, and everyone who lives and believes in Him shall never die. Also, like Martha, we may balk when Jesus calls us to step out in faith and do something akin to rolling back the stone from Lazarus' tomb. If this story teaches us anything, there is no situation too hopeless for Christ. No matter how dead something may be, Jesus can bring it back to life.

Application

- What are the dead things in your life right now that are being called to life by Christ?
- What things must first die before they can be resurrected?
- When Lazarus was brought from death to life, Jesus commanded: “...*unbind him and let him go.*” In what ways might you still be bound and failing to live into your resurrected life?
- How does the current state of the mainline church in the United States relate to the Lazarus story?
- In what ways does your church community need to be brought back to life?
- What insights does the story of Lazarus reveal for how such might be accomplished?



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