

## *Nourishment for the Journey*

### *Ruminations on John 11.1-44*

Some of us hear the story in John 11.1-44 of Lazarus being raised after four days, and believe that: "All things are possible through God. My faith in God's grace makes me stronger." Others of us think to ourselves that: "This could not have happened exactly as it was stated. The laws of the universe simply cannot be broken so easily." I've been on both sides of this equation, and have benefitted from both perspectives. Matters of faith require us to give a little latitude to ourselves and others if we are going to be able to go on respecting one another — much less ourselves as our own understandings change from time to time.

I'm at a place in my faith journey in which I don't need to believe in the literalness of the stories of the Bible to find them meaningful. I recall people telling me I'd lose my faith if I didn't accept everything just as it was written. But I have found that my faith has actually increased as I look at the Bible and its stories mytho-poetically. Indeed, things that would have once made me lose faith I now see as an opportunity to use my spiritual imagination and creativity to come to understand truths I'd never have encountered if I had continued to take things at face value.

Whether Lazarus was really dead 4 days or not, or whether Jesus actually brought him to life, don't matter to me as much as getting the "deeper" meaning for my life in the here and now. What efficacy does this story have in my life, and that of my culture, in the 21st century? Are there truths that it distills that can add to our own understanding beyond whether it was a historical or fabricated story?

Jesus fabricated many stories, calling them parables. He wanted to touch the human experience, and discovered this could be done best sometimes by using his imagination and creativity to concoct a story that taught a lesson about life and its values. I liked these stories growing up in the church, and was inspired by them. As a boy and youth, I would occasionally make up my own stories that revealed emotions and thoughts I had that otherwise would have been left orphaned. I learned about how modern writers do this when I was in High School in a genre called verisimilitude. I also learned how much fun it could be to create stories that had deep meaning without their necessarily having historical authenticity. (Sometime you might ask me about my sister that never was!) Have you ever read a book of fiction and thought it was truer to life than some non-fiction? Or that it had a more motivating message? In today's lectionary text from Ezekiel 37.1-14, we find such a story about a valley of dry bones coming to life. Almost all commentators agree it has no historical authenticity, and yet it is a very intriguing metaphor about how Israel was spiritually dead and yet could come to life again.

The story of Lazarus' resurrection foreshadows Jesus' own resurrection story, and there are a number of parallels between them. Commentators theorize the purpose John had in telling this story, and some even remark that, like those Hebrew story-tellers before him, he did not seem to care whether the story was factual as whether it served a need for the community of the faithful who could be inspired by it.

If we accept the story as simply a historical account that happened in Jesus' life, then while it may be an amazing story for what it says, it may seem to have little value to those of us living today. Honestly, does it change your life that Lazarus was resurrected? Even the writer of John doesn't seem to put much emphasis on Lazarus' life after he was raised. Lazarus does not speak a single word, nor do we even hear his name mentioned again after this miraculous story. Jesus has already performed many amazing miracles in the gospel, so does one more really make that much of a difference in our understanding of Jesus? If this story was plucked from the scriptures, would it change your faith about who Jesus was and how we ought to live as his disciples?

This story is rich with a variety of meanings. We could talk about the relationships Jesus had with this family of 2 sisters and a brother. We could speak of it as a metaphor illustrating the difference between physical life and death, and spiritual life and death. We could attune ourselves to the feelings of empathy and compassion of numerous characters in the story, as well as some possible illustrations of blame and resentment. We could see it as a part of John's larger theological ambition to describe who he thought Jesus was, and how that is different from how the authors of the three other gospels regarded Jesus. We could analyze the indications of Jesus' own humanity and divinity as they play out in this story. We could talk about the lessons of faith we could learn from it. We could parse out the values made manifest by the actions of Jesus and the other characters in the story. Or we could mytho-poetically engage this story and see what instruction it can give to us in our own lives, two millennia and a vastly different culture and worldview removed from the original setting.

Two sisters care about their ailing brother, and send out for help. Is this not beautiful in itself, regardless of the culture or time period? Was the sickness physical, spiritual, moral, psychological, or some combination of these? How do we ask for help and seek to aid those we most care about?

Jesus, once told of Lazarus' condition, says, "This illness does not lead to death...." But physically, it did. Is this itself an indicator that it is really a metaphorical story more than a literal one? From the text, it almost seems that Jesus "staged" the event so as to make it seem more glorified. Would he really have done such a thing, or is this the author rather trying to make it more glorified and miraculous so as to relay a different point? Is it ethical to manipulate a person's emotions and life or death circumstances to prove a point? Could Jesus have been preoccupied with other acts of compassion at the time, rather than simply waiting for a couple days to start his journey for more dramatic effect? What do our answers to these questions tell us about our own faith and view of Jesus?

In going back near to Jerusalem, where his life was in jeopardy, what was Jesus' decision-making process? Did he go out of pure love for this family of siblings, despite the possible danger to he and his disciples? Was he going for a broader purpose and plan? Or both, or neither? Given that the disciples agreed to go with him, even if it meant death, how would Jesus think about the risk his own behavior might mean to his disciples? To put oneself at risk may be courageous, but to put others at risk might seem reckless. Did he recognize they were making their own choice as well to go back? How does personal integrity and commitment to one's values put us at risk in our daily lives — with family & friends, employers & employees, acquaintances, strangers, and enemies? What differentiates between an action that is courageous and one that is foolish? Honorable and brazen? Committed and stubborn? Compassionate and self-serving? Overwhelmed and negligent?

Differing perspectives can be given with regard to Jesus' motives from those in the story. How does our relationship to another determine the degree to which we give someone a more ennobled interpretation of their behavior or a more cynical one? Is there a morality involved in how we interpret the behavior of others? Does what we think of others reflect more on them, or on us? What did the disciples tell Mary & Martha about Jesus' delay, if anything? What would have been appropriate, and what would have been inappropriate? Assumptions are made about those who are grieving in the story. What things should we assume, and what should we not assume about those in sorrow? What is the place, if any, of platitudes when another is grieving?

What did Jesus mean by, "I am the resurrection and the life?" Was he speaking about himself personally, or rather his values — as was often done by people in that day? Was it him personally, or the virtues he exemplified, that would be life-giving for others? In saying, "everyone who believes in me will never die," which is obviously mytho-poetic since everyone literally dies, does he mean to equate "belief" with a change of heart and being (as the greek and latin words for "belief" denote) and "never die" with a spiritual reality that is not confined by time and space? Could living by the same values and virtues of Jesus result in the same spiritual reality for us that was in him? And if it was his example rather than his personhood that

was considered to be the saving grace of life lived abundantly, how does this change our theology of who Jesus was and what his purpose was on this earth?

What does it say about Jesus that he cried publicly? Do you think of him as being weaker or stronger for having done so? Why did he weep? For not having arrived soon enough? Because he loved Lazarus? Because he saw Mary and the others crying, and his love for them was expressed in symbiotic empathy? Because he could see that his own death was near? What would count as healthy tears?

What was the bondage of Lazarus? Was it merely his ill health and physical death, or were these terms allegories for spiritual realities like apathy, lethargy, tepidness, credulity, cynicism, waywardness, inaction, disillusionment, depression, hedonism, faithlessness, despair, resentment, anger, grudges, hatred, anxiety, grief, ignorance, dispassion, and so on? How do these realities filter into our own lives, and mummify and entomb us from living our best lives? Do they create a "stench" in our lives? What "stones" block the graves of our own choices which lead to inevitable consequences?

Jesus told others to roll away Lazarus' stone. They may never have thought to do so until he so instructed them. But he then told them to "unbind him, and let him go." We often need others to unwrap the death cloths that impede our moral mobility and spiritual aspirations. Who has rolled away the stones that keep us from living freely and truly in accordance with our calling? How can we roll away the stones in others lives? How can we unwrap them from the bandages that are no longer healing, but are rather incapacitating death cloths in their lives?

--- Rev. Bret S. Myers, 3/30/2017