

POINTS TO PONDER

^{11.1} Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² Mary was the one who anointed Jesus with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Rabbi, he whom you love is ill." ⁴ But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather, it is for God's glory, so that the Child of God (i.e., Son of God) may be glorified through it." ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was."

— *John 11.1-6*

"Once again, John adds a story in his own gospel untold in the synoptics. Again, it is likely for his own purposes and audience rather than a historical account. John's story of the resurrection of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, foreshadows Jesus' own resurrection, and reveals John's strong emphasis on the resurrection as a mytho-poetic truth that is meant to inspire and encourage converts and would-be converts to the values and vision of the cosmic Christ. Resurrection is not simply for Jesus in John's gospel; it is for everyone; and by resurrection, he does not mean mere resuscitation, but rather a wholesale spiritual transformation of people and society – as like in the stories of the woman at the well and the man born blind. John seeks to convert the masses to Jesus' way, hoping to create the egalitarian society where justice, peace, and love are pervasive among all people.

Being cognizant of this purpose for John makes it easier for us to see how he is focused on creating stories to inspire people to join the Jesus movement, and therefore is not concerned about how Jesus is coming across to those of us with different cultural sensibilities living two millennia later in time. It is hard for us to fathom how Jesus could hear that the brother of the two women who hosted him and the disciples in Bethany on numerous occasions is dying and he would not come immediately upon hearing this news.

John explains it as Jesus intentionally delaying his journey to see Lazarus in order to help create more believers; but this sounds rather horrendous to compassionate ears that would focus on not creating more anguish for the sisters and death for their brother just to set the stage for a spectacular healing. How insensitive to their suffering to intentionally delay not coming to help; making them endure unnecessary anguish that he obviously has the power to alleviate.

John's obliviousness to how he is portraying Jesus' lack of compassion all to prove a point is indicative of John's own narrow focus in trying to captivate the imaginations of potential converts. It seems rather narcissistic of either Jesus or God receiving "glory" for an unimaginable miracle of bringing a dead and decomposing corpse to life again while it requires days of heart-wrenching suffering for people whom Jesus is said to love deeply. Is this what loved ones would make their loved ones go through just to show how fantastic that they or God were? Does God really need this kind of adoration? Would a compassionate God even want such adoration if the price is causing others to endure debilitating grief?

I can't imagine the compassionate God I trust in doing such a thing; which leads me to surmise that John has constructed the story to portray the divinity of Jesus so as to acquire followers rather than thinking through how self-absorbed it makes Jesus appear. Honestly, who among us would be willing to make our closest friends and loved ones suffer just so we could "be glorified through it?"

John seems to be aware that people might take it the wrong way, but this does not distract him from his bigger purpose. Unfortunately, portraying Jesus as so lacking in compassion just so he can be glorified hurts the cause more than helps; but for those of the faith, we can recognize that this is John's emphasis and unlikely Jesus' own emphasis. To treat a woman who cleaned and anointed Jesus' feet with her own hair, having her and her sister wait on your coming till their brother literally dies, and then for four days more than that, just to set up a fantastic miracle is beyond insensitive. We need as postmodern readers to recognize the insensitivity this story portrays, and reject it as true to the character of Christ – else, in legitimizing insensitivity, we ourselves might become insensitive to the plight of others for our own glory."

— Bret S. Myers, 3/21/2023

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 trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble because the light is not in them." ¹¹ After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin,^[d] said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him.""

— John 11.7-16

"Jesus had left Judea to avoid being imprisoned and killed by the authorities, and now he is going back in order to visit with the household of Mary and Martha given their brother's illness and death. It is risky to go back to within a couple miles of Jerusalem to the town of Bethany where they live. If he is spotted, he will be arrested and likely killed. The disciples know this and object to his decision. They, too, may be arrested and killed for being his disciples. Their lives are on the line, as well as his. Is it worth going back to be with this family undergoing a crisis? The compassionate Jesus shows up again in John's gospel, and he is determined to go.

It is unclear what the saying about walking during the day versus stumbling at night, likely a colloquialism of that time, means in this context. Mytho-poetically, it makes sense that Jesus, the light of the world for John, walks during the day and avoids walking at night. But daylight is not when they would want to walk, as they can be more easily spotted that way. Jesus may know that his time is near, and may be already resolved to die for his convictions if need be. John certainly attributes this foreseeing of Jesus as part of who he was. But for the disciples, they are hoping to continue their ministry with Jesus rather than have it come to an abrupt end.

When Jesus tells the disciples that Lazarus has fallen asleep, they take him literally rather than metaphorically – much like people still today take John's gospel. Jesus then makes it clear that Lazarus is dead. They must have thought it even more peculiar that Jesus wants to go when Lazarus has already died. Why risk their own lives to save a man when he has already died? It would have been too risky in their minds to go when they thought he was ill but still alive. But it must seem absurd to them to go once Jesus tells them he is dead. Why should they all have to die perhaps to simply go mourn? Wasn't it Jesus himself who said to let the dead bury the dead? Why is he not making any sense?

Thomas is quick to understand the circumstances of their going back to Judea when the authorities are out for blood. He assumes they will arrest and kill Jesus, and also all of his disciples. Going back, in his mind, means a death sentence. And Thomas shows his faithfulness, not his doubt, in convincing the other disciples to go back to Judea with Jesus where they will all die at the hands of the authorities. Thomas is willing to die for, and with, Jesus. So odd that we call him 'doubting Thomas' when he was obviously among the most faithful of Jesus' disciples in following his vision and being willing to die for the cause. He may be 'doubting' in his beliefs about being asked to believe in people coming back alive after they are dead for days, but he is faithful about what really matters: living by God's values and virtues even if it results in his own demise. He deserves more credit than many have been willing to give him."

— Bret S. Myers, 3/21/2023

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Rabbi, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." 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."

— *John 11.17-24*

"Jesus had likely been a couple days journey from Bethany, so when he finally arrived Lazarus had died and was already buried – four days, says John. In such a warm climate, the body would be decomposing quickly. Autolysis and rigor mortis would have started immediately, and bloating would have already occurred in 3 days. He was in the tomb 4 days – meaning he was likely dead 5 days. Given the level of decomposition of the body at 5 days, we know that this story is not historically factual. It is scientifically impossible; just like the story from Ezekiel 37, another lectionary text for today, where it was said that a valley of dry bones had sinews, muscles, and organs all reconstituted and life was given to them. That story, as it states, is metaphorical; and so, too, is this one. But that doesn't mean it doesn't have meaning beyond the literal interpretation of it. Indeed, as with most Biblical stories, the mytho-poetic meaning is far more potent than any literal meaning that could be given.

The story of Lazarus being resurrected this long after being dead is, like Ezekiel 37, a story about how we are to never lose sight of the greater meaning and purpose of life. We are to work for justice, promote peace, and love others as ourselves. This story is full of those who loved Lazarus, and who wept for his passing. When we lose loved ones, it seems our whole world ends – that life's meaning has all but disappeared with them. But resurrection stories like this remind us that spirit survives physicality. The valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37 came to life, and were given spirit. Spirit is what we lose when we are in mourning, dejection, despair, and meaninglessness. We can regain that spirit, despite our circumstances, but it is as difficult it seems as bringing a rotting corpse or a valley of bones back to life.

While many take comfort in thinking that Lazarus' story of resurrection may happen to them when they die, we miss the bigger meaning if that is how limited our hopes are. The bigger picture is how we, while we are living, connect to the real life that is in accordance with God's own values and virtues. When we live for that purpose, we gain eternal meaning to our lives. Our character is passed on to those whose lives we touch, and that then ripples out to others such that our life touches those whom we never met, and even those who live generations or even millennia after us. This is the faith of those who put love, peace, and justice as their *raison d'être* – who live by Christ's own way.

John's mention of Jerusalem as only being two miles away from Bethany reveals how close Jesus and his disciples are to death. And yet they don't let their fears of their own mortality control their behavior. They are who they are, and they will follow their values even if it leads to their death. The point is that when we do this, we live eternally. We show that we have not simply lived and died, but that we genuinely lived; we were alive with spirit – the same spirit in which the bones described in Ezekiel found after years of being like old dry bones...the same spirit in which gave life to the entire earth as depicted in Genesis...the same spirit in which we all can have if we follow the virtues and values of Jesus. This is the true life Christ wants for us. It is what Rumi, the Sufi mystic, was talking about when he said, *"I learned that every mortal will taste death, but only some will taste life."*

Martha went to see Jesus rather than waiting for him to come to her for what may not be obvious reasons. Many today assume that she was so desirous to see Jesus that she couldn't wait; but the more likely scenario is that she was aware that the authorities were looking to arrest and kill Jesus, and so she went to him so as to protect him. Having him come there would endanger him, and she didn't want his blood on her hands.

Martha loved and cared for Jesus deeply, but she may have been a bit miffed that he didn't come right away when she had sent a messenger to tell Jesus that Lazarus with deathly ill. Her comment is that had he gotten there sooner, he would have been able to keep him alive and heal him. Moreover, there may have been an insinuation that she would not have had to undergone all this grief in seeing him sick, die,

and then buried. We can imagine the slight she must have felt from Jesus in delaying his coming to see them; especially given all they had done for him and his disciples.

Nevertheless, John portrays Martha as faithful, having her say that despite what has already happened, she still trusts in the teachings of Jesus, and how his vision has not died in her. This is what is meant when she says, *"But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."* She has not lost faith in Jesus simply because he didn't come when asked. After all, she understands that he may not have wanted to show himself in Judea after almost having been stoned when he was there recently. She may not like it that Jesus didn't come, but she can understand his motive for self-preservation.

Jesus says to her what she takes to be comforting words: that her brother will rise again. She, like Jesus, was of the Pharisaic tradition of Judaism that believed there would be a resurrection of the dead. She, as she had learned to do, was taking Jesus mytho-poetically. But in an ironic twist of story-telling, John has Jesus being literal rather than metaphorical in this instance. It is imminent foreshadowing of what is about to happen to Lazarus – even though the whole story was concocted to give us mytho-poetic meaning in following Christ, even in the face of life's greatest tragedies, and even death itself. It is crafty story-telling at its best; revealing that when people truly believe in the vision and values of Christ, that extraordinary things happen to us – not only spiritually, but in the physicality of our lives as well. It is an ingenious attempt to appeal to both the sacred and banal aspects of human living, and so win more converts to the way of Christ."

— *Bret S. Myers, 3/21/2023*

"²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and trusts in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Rabbi, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Child (i.e., Son) of God, the one coming into the world.""

— *John 11.25-27*

"John quickly moves back into the realm of the mytho-poetic with Jesus' response to Martha's statement of faith. The synoptics offer no equivalent words of Jesus speaking about himself in this way. This is pure John, and accords with his overall objective. Eternal life (i.e., life imbued with meaning and purpose in a timeless, though not forever, state of being) is available to all who live by Jesus' virtues and values, for they are the same as those of God. Martha does attest to this way of living, and that Jesus, as the Messiah, is the one who reveals this state of being for all to follow. It is this value system that she believes is coming into the world, first with Jesus, and then with all who follow in his ways. Martha indicates that she is a faithful disciple, and this helps John to convince his hearers that if Martha, who had good reason to be upset with Jesus for not showing up when she asked him to come urgently, can forgive Jesus and get past his inaction on her part, then they have every reason to accept him and his ways in their own lives. Faced with death of her dear brother, she is still able to see life in Jesus; and it is that life that she puts ahead of her own grief for her brother. It is a powerful testimony for the transformative life that is offered when we trust in Christ's way. And, of course, for John it is a story that will win over many converts to Jesus' way."

— *Bret S. Myers, 3/21/2023*

"²⁸ When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ The Jews who were with her in the house consoling her saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Rabbi, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Rabbi, come and see." ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. 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 have kept this man from dying?""

— *John 11.28-37*

“Martha goes back to tell her sister that Jesus wants to see her, too. Again, it is the women who go to Jesus, rather than he to them, in order that they can keep him safe from those who are out to arrest him. They understand his reticence in coming to see them when he could end up as dead as their brother.

Mary, who like Martha, loves Jesus and is a faithful disciple, goes immediately to him – unlike the delay he had in going to see them. The literary opposition of these acts is interesting, as it is the women, rather than Jesus, who makes the faithful and quick first steps. Jesus, indeed, hadn’t moved from where he was when he saw Martha – likely many hours before. Mary still journeys towards Jesus (which, by the way, has its own mytho-poetic meanings).

Mary leaves by herself to go see Jesus; given that the people comforting her are Jewish, and may, if they see Jesus, report his presence to the authorities who will take him into custody. The protective actions of these women will be seen in stark contrast to the betrayal of Jesus by Judas Iscariot, and the fearfulness of the male disciples in not admitting to knowing Jesus when he is arrested. However, the Jewish women follow her, being loyal to their compassion for her in not leaving her alone without those who are there to help her.

When Mary finds Jesus, she immediately kneels at his feet; a symbol of her loyalty to him and his ways. Like Martha, she may be a bit miffed that Jesus didn’t come, and repeats verbatim what Martha had said to him earlier with regard to how he could have saved the life of their brother if he had arrived in time do so. (We remember, too, that Jesus is asked on the cross why he doesn’t save himself, paralleling this passage). But Mary, the more emotionally and spiritually sensitive of the two women, cannot utter more words than these. She breaks down weeping, and no other words are forthcoming.

Jesus himself weeps in seeing Mary weep. He deeply loves Mary, and cannot stand to see her in anguish, even though the bystanders believe that he is weeping for Lazarus. Part of his weeping may have also been in recognizing what suffering that his delay has caused Mary and her sister. He is overcome with sorrow. To the credit of the gospel writers, they do not shy away from having Jesus cry in public. We see Jesus weep on multiple occasions (e.g., when he looks upon Jerusalem, and in the Garden of Gethsemane), and here John furthermore describes him as distraught and moved in spirit.

The words of the bystanders must have been a proverbial sword in his side when they, too, ask whether he might have saved Lazarus from dying, and all of this grief of his sisters, if he had only come right away. They had heard he had healed the man born blind, so if he could do such a powerful miracle, then surely he could have saved a sick man from dying. We see the humanity of even John’s cosmic Christ as he visibly weeps and manifests a deeply disturbed spirit. All the grief he has witness by these sisters he loves has wrenched his heart, mind, and soul. He is overcome with compassion for them.”

— *Bret S. Myers, 3/21/2023*

“³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Rabbi, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you trusted you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Creator, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.””

— *John 11.38-44*

“The similarity of this story of a man laid in a tomb with a stone sealing the cave crypt, the stone being removed, the multiple days in the tomb, and of his being unbound is striking to what we will be hearing of

Jesus later. The parallelism of different events in the story of Jesus in John's gospel is evident to the careful observer throughout the gospel. And it is all for a purpose. Here Jesus liberates a man from death itself, making Jesus' later liberation from God more believable. The unexpected becomes the expected in John's gospel, serving to break down the last intellectual defenses who find the stories hard to believe.

When Jesus says to remove the stone, there were likely gasps of revulsion. Martha, the practical sister, warns Jesus that the stench of their brother's decomposing body is prevalent; as if to say, without actually saying it, 'Don't remove the stone. He's dead. We need to get past the facts, and start living the lives God calls us to.' She tells him, in case he didn't know, that Lazarus has been entombed for four days. What can be smelled without seeing will be even more loathsome to see.

Of course, this story mytho-poetically parallels what Jews of that day thought of their own plight in being subservient to Roman authority. They had no real life in them. Life, as they once knew it, or as their ancestors had once known it, was no longer present. Israel was a decaying corpse under Roman rule, and the stench of their indignity was putrid to them. They did not want to look at themselves, for they seemed like Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, given they had little autonomy over their own lives. But, of course, this is why the story is here, and why Jesus is cast as the resurrector of the very dead Lazarus. Lazarus represents the current circumstance of Jews under the Roman Empire. They are effectively as good as buried; and have been for some time. It is useless, they believed, to hope beyond the irreversible facts of their effective non-existence. And yet, Jesus is here to tell them otherwise. Spirit can be revived in them even as it had been in Ezekiel's metaphor of the valley of bones.

Unfortunately, John places rather egotistical and arrogant words in Jesus' mouth, having him being more concerned with 'I told you so' rather than 'I'm so sorry.' He must have sounded like a crazy man to them in asking them to remove the stone, but they obliged him; perhaps thinking this is what they should do for a mourner. John continues to 'prove' his point about Jesus being the Messiah to his own detriment. If John spoke of Jesus as the Messiah, that would be one thing. But to put in Jesus' mouth words that he is so connected to God and that he is only saying aloud what he is saying because these other people just don't get what he gets comes off as more than a little pompous. Again, having him articulate his motive for saying these self-promoting things as being "*so that they may believe that you sent me,*" does not come off as I'm sure John was hoping it would. Lazarus is dead, his sisters are bitterly weeping, and Jesus, while intent on bringing him back to life, seems even more focused on how he appears in the eyes of others. There is little empathy or compassion in his words, for it is all about him. This is not how Mark, Matthew, or Luke portrayed Jesus; who in their gospels was a much more humble character.

Still, in John's mind, obviously, the fact that Jesus is bringing Lazarus back to life overshadows the cringe-worthy statements of Jesus trying to prove himself to others. Let me say, I don't think Jesus actually said these things. They would be out of character with the Jesus of the synoptics.

But again, the point is not that we take all, or any, of this story as literal; but that we realize that John is trying to make what he believes is the larger point of who Jesus is and why we all ought to trust in him and his ways.

In a parallelism reminiscent of Genesis' creation story, and in the first verse of John's own gospel, Jesus, like God, speaks words and a new reality emerges. The Word has become flesh. And even when flesh has decayed, the Word restores flesh. Jesus tells Lazarus to "come out;" and he does – just like light was created, like plants were created, like animals and birds and fish were created, and like humanity was created. Spoken words from a divine source create and transform old realities into new ones; giving life to that which was thought to be inanimate...giving spirit to that in which there seemed to be no spirit at all.

The mythic power of this story is amazing, as any rational mind would wonder how decomposition became recomposition; while simultaneously having us to trust that a culture languishing in a crypt-like existence

can be given renewed and resurrected spirit that will fill our lives to overflowing with meaning and purpose. Perhaps the storyteller left the bandages on Lazarus given what the mind would conjure that they all saw when he emerged. But again, the point is not that a single man was raised from the dead; but rather that we can all be raised to new life in Christ if we simply follow his way...if we adopt and implement his vision for a new world order.

Are we convinced by this story? Are we willing to risk death ourselves to try to save a dying culture? How might we change John's story to make it more appealing to people in the 21st century? Would it be faithful to make those changes in order to keep the spirit of Christ alive? Or are we willing to hold on to ancient stories just as they are, even when they seem unbelievable and impossible to people with a more scientific mindset? Do we renew the faith by creating our own myths, and do we entomb our faith by insisting that the stories never be changed to make sense to the current culture?

Mark, Matthew and Luke all told similar, yet unique, stories about Jesus with different emphases. John then came along and totally changed the story-telling; inventing whole new storylines so as to provide mythic power to his audiences. Do we judge each of these gospel writers as faithful to Christ in trying to make Jesus better understood by their respective audiences? Or do we think they are unfaithful in not giving a definitive and historical account which would die with each culture in which the story can no longer make sense? How does their individual way of telling the story of Jesus in their different ways tell us about what it means to be faithful to the spirit of Christ?

Maybe Jesus last words in this story give us cause for further reflection: 'Unbind him, and let him go.' Perhaps we need to unbind ourselves and others from traditions that no longer give inspiration, meaning, and purpose to people living today. Maybe we free ourselves for greater faithfulness when we become more inspired by the values and virtues of Christ rather than the beliefs we have dogmatized about Christ...by building character and spirit in people rather than maintaining rituals and creeds designed by, and for the benefit of, institutions."

— *Bret S. Myers, 3/21/2023*