

THE RAISING OF LAZARUS  
CALLING FORTH LIFE OUT OF DEATH  
JOHN 11: 1-45 (Tom Caruso)

Things have changed dramatically since I first started looking at some background material on today's Gospel. Then, we were fumbling and trying to figure out whether to bump elbows or bow at the kiss of peace, or raise our hands at the Lord's Prayer, or how to keep some distance from each other in church, because of the corona virus. Very soon thereafter gatherings of more than 250 persons were banned and we started suggesting that some people stay away from Mass. Then gatherings of more than 25 were banned, so all Masses until after Easter were cancelled. Now we are ordered to stay in our homes except for essential services and exercise, and some Masses and prayer services are being streamed to our computers or phones.

I am 74 years old. My wife is 71. Our son Dominic is a resident doctor at OHSU hospital. My 81-year-old sister is in a foster care home. I am afraid. Of the known and the unknown. I fear for myself and for others. I face the possibility that I may or may not be alive a month from now. That some of my loved ones may or may not be alive. That some members of this St. Andrew community that I love and cherish so much may or may not be here the next time we are able to gather to celebrate the eucharist together.

I am grieving – not only the above potential losses, but the loss of normalcy, the loss of social contact, of gathering with my family, with my community. Grieving that I cannot scoop up and hug my two-year-old twin grandchildren. And I cannot even explain to them why.

And still there is beauty and goodwill and friendship and neighborliness and love and caring. Friends and family call “just to touch base” or “just to see how you are doing.” Friends email cheery messages and pictures. Neighbors email offers of support and help and solidarity. People video chat with each other. Younger people offer to make grocery runs and do other errands for their elders most at risk. Volunteers keep the food pantry going for those most in need. Joggers and walkers smile and offer greetings as they divert out into the street to keep their “social distance.” Expressions of love and concern and “we will get thru this together” come from all directions. And we are constantly reminded of new life as the stunningly beautiful, long, drawn- out spring that only Portland can give us continues to unfold. The daffodils and daphne, with us since late January, still linger as the tulips begin to unfold and the magnolias and fruit blossoms and camelias burst forth and grace our streets and our neighborhoods with their beauty. Still so many opportunities for gratitude, for joy.

Today’s gospel – the story of the raising of Lazarus – is a story about fear and grief and death, but also a story about new life and joy and hope.

It is certainly about death. Lazarus was dead. Jesus makes that clear before leaving for Bethany. Lazarus was in the tomb for 4 days by the time they get there. The story is also about fear. The disciples fear for their own lives, and for Jesus. They are afraid to go back to Judea because the authorities were just trying to stone Jesus there. Thomas says, “let us also go to die with him.” (in fact, the supreme irony of John’s gospel is that the religious authorities decide to kill Jesus because he gives life.)

This is also a story about grieving. When Mary went out to meet Jesus she was weeping. So were the Jewish mourners who were keeping her company. If you have ever heard professional wailing at a middle eastern funeral, you know it is a heart-rending and gut-wrenching sound. When Jesus saw Mary crying and heard the wailing, he lost his composure and his raw humanity showed. He became agitated and deeply troubled. He felt that awful ache in his gut from the grief and the pain and the loss and the anger at the very fact of death. And he wept.

And in the middle of all this there is the discussion between Jesus and Martha about resurrection and life. “your brother will rise,” says Jesus, and Martha acknowledges that he will rise on the last day. But this is not what Jesus is talking about. “I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if [s]he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” Jesus offers eternal life, divine life, life in all its fullness to those who believe in him – that is, to those who commit to follow the life and values he proclaimed and lived. Martha answers Jesus, “yes, Lord.” She does believe and commit to who Jesus is and what he is all about, even before seeing her brother raised.

For John’s gospel the raising of Lazarus is the ultimate sign of who Jesus is and what he is about. Jesus goes to the tomb, orders the stone to be removed, prays to god and draws on the divine power within him, and cries out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” From the stench and ugliness of sickness and death, from the fear and the anxiety and the grieving and the pain and the weeping and the loss and the anger, Jesus calls forth life. This

is who Jesus is. He is a giver of life. He is one who calls forth life out of death. And this is also what we are called to.

The key question here – for the elect, candidates, and all followers of Jesus – is what are we committing to when we believe in Jesus as resurrection and life? “eternal life” is a core theme of John’s gospel used to sum up what Jesus is all about. The raising of Lazarus reveals the identity and mission of Jesus, which is to give eternal life to those who believe in him. So, what is “eternal life?”

One way of understanding eternal life is that it is John’s equivalent of the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed in the synoptic gospels. And in the words of one of our beloved former pastors, Father Bob Krueger, when we believe in (i.e. commit to) Jesus, we are committing to build communities that would continue Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God “by living its values, by witnessing that the coming of the rule of god was actually happening, happening in their mutual love and support, their efforts toward liberation from social evil, in their resistance to all that is anti-human and anti-creation, and that all of this is included in the spirituality of every Christian today, along with communal liturgy, sacraments and reflective prayer.”

Another way of understanding eternal life is that Christian belief gives us a new horizon, a new way of looking at, and understanding, both life and death. John’s point in this story is that Jesus as resurrection, Jesus as life, is in another order. Living with the life that Jesus came to give is qualitatively different from being alive in the body. Think of the stories of people who

have had an “aha” moment in their lives, a near death experience, an incident that changed their entire perspective on what is important in life, and they begin to live differently. Victor Hugo once said, “it is nothing to die. It is frightful not to live.” And Mary Oliver, in her poem “when death comes,” says

“When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder  
if I have made of my life something particular, and real  
I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened,  
or full of argument

I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.”

For Christians eternal life also entails the belief in Jesus’ presence in our lives and our community and our world, despite his physical absence. Pope Francis reflects this belief beautifully in *Laudato Si*, which our parish has been studying this Lent, in which he says that the risen Jesus is “present throughout creation . . . . Mysteriously holding [the creatures of this world] to himself and directing them toward fullness as their end. The very flowers of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence.” (par. 100) Such a belief calls Christians to an “ecological conversion” wherein “living our vocation to be protective of God’s handiwork is essential to . . . Our Christian experience.”

Finally, the story of the raising of Lazarus affirms for Christians that physical death is not the last word. Jesus’ followers believe in his real presence in and through his physical absence, which is eternal life. Jesus’

disciples understand both life and death in a new way. The Irish poet and philosopher John O'Donohue has a beautiful, hopeful reflection on death and eternal life:

“Death is actually a rebirth . . . . The eternal world is not some faraway galaxy that we haven't discovered yet. The eternal world is here. The dead are here with us, invisible to us, but we can sense their presence. They are looking out for us.

“For us time is linear, but for the dead it is more a circle of eternity . . . . the Celtic people did not divide time from eternity . . . . Eternity is not an extension of time, but it is pure presence, pure belonging. When you are in the eternal, you are outside of nothing. You are within everything, enjoying the fullest participation. There is no more separation . . . . You are embraced in the purest circle of love.”

John uses the death of a deeply loved friend and brother, with all its painful grieving and tears and wailing and anger and frustration and fear and ambiguity and loss, as a setting to show us that Jesus was, and is, first and foremost a giver of life, a bringer of new life out of a broken and shattered and angry and frightened and tearful world. This story is particularly relevant to us right now. In the midst of fear, anxiety, grieving, and even death, we are called, not to deny these things, for that would be to deny our humanity; but like Lazarus, Martha and Mary we are called forth to life, to hope, and even joy, and to be bearers of this new life and hope to each other, to our communities and to our world.