

The Raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-45)



Image credit: The Raising of Lazarus, Duccio di Buoninsegna (c.1310), Kimberly Museum of Art, Public Domain

The gospel reading for [5th Sunday in Lent](#), Lectionary Cycle A, is the account of the raising of Lazarus from the dead ([John 11:1-45](#)). The account follows the story of the healing of the man born blind ([John 9:1-41](#)). In the commentary on that gospel it was explained that the miracles (called “signs” / *semeia*) in the gospel according to John point beyond themselves to the divine – not just the divine as a vague power, but to a person. They identify Jesus as the light and life of the world, the bread of life from heaven, and the Logos who, through the *semeia*/signs, reveals his own glory, which is also the glory of God his Father, since he and the Father are one and since he does the Father’s will and works. These signs are given that we might believe (Jn 20:26). For John, sin is the failure to believe and accept the consequential changes in one’s life. All the characters of John 9 (on-lookers, neighbors, parents, the Pharisees and other religious leaders) are judged in their failure to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior and to subsequently become witnesses to Jesus as the glory of God.

Chapter 10 continues the revelation of Jesus – and like the chapters before it, also reveals faith among people in the way they respond to the signs – or sin in the way they fail/refuse to respond to the sign. In John 10, Jesus reveals/identifies himself as the good shepherd (10:11,14) promised by Zechariah 34 who would bring the lost sheep of Israel back into the covenant relationship. The religious authorities respond that Jesus must be possessed by a demon – a far graver accusation than those levied against Jesus in John 9.

This represents an intensification of the growing conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities. Even as the authorities are divided, yet increasingly hostile to the person of Jesus and his ministry, at the same time, some have believed in Jesus. In the midst of this Jesus has already made oblique

references to his death and resurrection (being “*lifted up*” in 3:14, 8:28). Those references will become more clear in John 11 when many parties begin to speak about Jesus’ impending death

Seeking to put all questions to an end, the authorities command Jesus to tell them plainly if he is the Messiah. Jesus’ answer is simple – I already did and if you can’t believe my words, then consider my works. This concludes with Jesus’ statement, “*The Father and I are one.*” The authorities clearly understand his meaning and take up stones (10:31) to kill Jesus because he has blasphemed (v.33) in claiming to be God. Jesus leaves Jerusalem and “*went back across the Jordan to the place where John first baptized, and there he remained. Many came to him ...And many there began to believe in him.*” (John 10:40-42)

Setting and Life: “*I have come that they might have life and have it to the full*” (John 10:10)

The great Johannine scholar, Fr. Raymond Brown suggests the following outline of this narrative (vv.1-44) which he calls: *Jesus gives life to Lazarus – a sign that Jesus is the life,*

- Setting (vv.1-6)
- Should Jesus go up to Judea? (vv.7-16)
- Jesus arrives at Bethany: arrival and greetings (vv.17-33)
- Raising of Lazarus (vv.34-44)
- Meaning (v.45)

Setting. Here the setting means more than the location or geography. While there is a mention of “Bethany” a village located in the vicinity of Jerusalem, the opening verses (vv.1-6) are really an introduction of the family whom Jesus loves and who are believers. Even their introduction is laced with references to the impending death of Jesus. The editorial aside (v.2: *Mary was the one who had anointed the Lord with perfumed oil and dried his feet with her hair*) points forward to Mary’s anointing of Jesus as a sign of preparation for death and burial (12:1-8) placing that death at the very head of the story of Lazarus.

The sisters’ message (v.3) does not explicitly ask for Jesus to respond or take a specific action, but since the message characterizes Lazarus as the one whom Jesus loves, the implicit request is there: come and love Lazarus to life. We are given great hope in Jesus’ response: *This illness is not to end in death* (v.4); surely those words gave the hearers the impression that again Jesus would provide a healing – as before giving glory to God – but then Jesus inexplicably stayed put for two days. At this point within the narrative one can only speculate as to the reason, but from outside the narrative one can begin to wonder about the words: “*that the Son of God may be glorified through it.*” From the beginning of the fourth gospel the purpose of the signs (*semeia*) has been to reveal the glory of Jesus: “*Jesus did this as the beginning of his signs in Cana in Galilee and so revealed his glory, and his disciples began to believe in him*” (John 2:11). Jesus’ glory is described as his possession since before the foundation of the world (17:5, 24) one that is founded in love and indicates oneness with the Father (17:22).

In a key and important way, John 11 continues the central narrative about the signs that Jesus performed in order for people to believe and because of that belief have life. The sign given in John 11 is the raising of Lazarus – technically a resuscitation, i.e., being restored to the life that was before. On one level, Jesus is glorified by the resuscitation of Lazarus. On another level, the hour of Jesus’ glory is his suffering and death. Lazarus’ illness (and resuscitation) is for the glory of God not just because of itself, but because it will ultimately lead to Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Too quickly people move to point forward to Jesus’ own resurrection as though Lazarus only served to point to that event. As all the other signs (*semeia*) in John, the raising of Lazarus points to Jesus who is the source of life – both here and in the “last days.” John has already introduced us to the “life” theme

when speaking of rebirth (Nicodemus) and living water (Samaritan woman); in reference to the life-giving word; in context of the life-giving bread (Jn 6); in Jesus' self description as the "light of life" (8:12); as well as the previous chapter's assertion "*I have come that they might have life and have it to the full*" (10:10). All of these accounts continue to remind us that meeting Jesus always operates on the physical and spiritual level – and often the miracle (sign/*semeia*) serve as the vehicle to make this point clear.

The raising of Lazarus from death has the meaning that is clear and evident: one who was dead has been raised from death and restored to life. It also possesses a symbolic meaning – the giving of life to all people whom Jesus loves. This sign also carries meaning about spiritual death seen as separation from God and spiritual life as connection with God. Both are part of John's message in this text. One should note the similar dual meaning that was part of the story about the healing of the man born blind man wherein there is both physical and spiritual blindness.

Should Jesus Go to Judea?

After Jesus' bread of life discourse in John 6, "*Jesus moved about within Galilee; but he did not wish to travel in Judea, because the Jews were trying to kill him*" (7:1). The recent appearance in Jerusalem had also ended with the religious authorities seeking to have Jesus stoned to death (10:31-33). Naturally the disciples ask why Jesus would want to do such a blatantly dangerous thing. At one level of meaning, it shows that in choosing the time to enter Judea, Jesus is choosing the time ("*my hour*"; see 2:4; 7:30; 8:20) for his death – God is in control of these things. This choice has already been expressed to the disciples: "*This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again.*" (10:17-18). Finally, the reason is summarized in v.15: *that you may believe.*"

It is in the context of this summarizing reason that one gains insight into Jesus' explanation in 11:9-14. The "*twelve hours in a day*" refers to Jesus' presence among the disciples, guiding them that they not stumble because they see the "*light of the world*" – i.e., Jesus (cf. 8:12; 9:5). As Jesus' hour approaches, the time for the disciples to move from darkness to light is limited. The stumbling block is not death, rather it is walking apart from the light of the world. The disciples see a clear stumbling block and note: "*the Jews were just trying to stone you, and you want to go back there?*" (11:8)

The metaphor of sleeping as death is well used in the NT (see lots of examples: Mt 27:52; 1 Cor 7:39, 11:30, 15:16-20, 51; 1 Thess 4:13-15) – and so Jesus describes Lazarus' death (that will not end in death (v.4) – although ironically leading to Jesus' death) as being asleep and says the in the end Lazarus will be awakened (John 11:11). The disciples rightly ask: "*Master, if he is asleep, he will be saved.*" Which I suggest can be understood as: "Well, good... if he is only asleep, let him wake, and let's not tempt the authorities with our presence." The word "saved" (*sōzō*) used in v.12 can mean either "saved" or "healed." Given the nature of the disciples' response it seems that "healed" would have been the better option for the disciples – but the subtle Johannine word play is lost to English readers. This gives rise to Jesus making clear in v.14 that Lazarus has died. What is unusual in this response is that Jesus so quickly clears up their misunderstanding – perhaps only highlighting the shortness of time.

Thomas' response is that of the obedient disciple who does not fully understand what is being revealed to him, but will trust and operate out of that trust – assuming he is responding to the imminence of Jesus' death. Thomas' response is actually ambiguous – the "him" of v.16 could refer to Lazarus since that is the most immediate death in context. It is perhaps no more than unclear grammar, but again it may well be the choice that faces all would-be disciples: "believe" (v.15) and as Jesus dies and is resurrected, so too will the disciple die, but be saved.

Martha, the Sister of Lazarus

Upon their arrival in Bethany, Jesus' assertion about Lazarus' death (v.14) is confirmed. The four-day period underscores the finality of death. According to popular belief, the spirit of the person hovered around the body for three days after the death, hoping to reenter the body. But after the third day, when the soul "sees that the color of its face has changed," the soul leaves the body for good (*Gen. Rab. 100*). When Jesus arrives fellow mourners had already arrived to console the grieving sisters – but they will also serve another purpose: witness.

What was implied in v.3 is now explicit in v.21: we were hoping that you would have come and saved our brother. Martha speaks these words to Jesus: "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*" (v.21). We know what she says; what is unclear is how, with what tone, she says them. Most often commentaries have the words carry the tone of regret yet in a faithful voice. Too often one cannot imagine the tone being a basic complaint. Yet the complaining is the language of the psalms, the language of Job and so many other passages in the OT – it should not be so quickly dismissed. The complaining tone make the faith statement (v.22) even more pronounced. Martha still believes that Jesus is the righteous man to whom God will listen (one need not move to rapidly to the confession of Jesus as Messiah in v.27).

Jesus' response is simple and perhaps ambiguous: "*You brother will rise.*" These words could be taken to mean either 'your brother will rise again in the general resurrection on the last day' or 'your brother will be restored to life immediately'. Martha responds within the context of her Jewish beliefs asserting the belief in the general resurrection.

To move her beyond the orthodoxy of the Pharisees, *Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.'* This statement contains the fifth of seven different 'I am' sayings with predicates in the Fourth Gospel (6:35, 48, 51; 8:12; 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5). It involves three claims:

- (1) Jesus himself is the resurrection and the life, i.e. the Father has given him to have life in himself and to bestow resurrection life upon whomever he will (5:21, 26).
- (2) People who believe in him, even if they die (as Lazarus had done) will live—Jesus will raise them from death on the last day. What he would soon do for Lazarus would foreshadow the resurrection of the last day.
- (3) People who live and believe in him will never die; not even death can break their relationship with God.

With these claims Jesus made himself central to the Jewish hope of the resurrection and eternal life, and by asking Martha, *Do you believe this?*, he encouraged her to recognize this.

Martha's response is a confession of faith: "*Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world.*" She had moved beyond her previous beliefs about Jesus' righteousness (v.22) and the general Jewish beliefs (v.24). She accepts Jesus' central role in bringing about the resurrection on the last day, adding that she believed he was the Christ, the Son of God, the one whom the Father had sent into the world. The title 'the Son of God' is now known to have been used as a messianic title among first-century Jews. Martha's confession echoes Nathanael's confession (1:49), and is of the status of Peter's confession (6:68-69) and Thomas' (20:28) and is an example of what the evangelist hopes will be evoked by his Gospel in the hearts and minds of his readers (20:31).

Mary, the sister of Lazarus

When Jesus calls, Mary responds. The mourners believed Mary was going to the tomb and so they followed, but Mary's destination was to the feet of Jesus. Perhaps the evangelist wants us to see in

Mary's prostration an act of worship. And seemingly in tension with her worship, she reproached him as Martha had done (v.21,33) for not coming in time to prevent her brother's death. Perhaps these two things can coexist, reflecting her faith in Jesus and her despair at the same time. She says nothing else. She doesn't utter all the proper phrases like Martha about the all-powerful Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God or any belief about the resurrection of the dead. Mary just cries.

Verses 33 and 34 present a problem in translation – consider the following three modern translations:

- “When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her weeping, he became perturbed and deeply troubled³⁴ and said, “Where have you laid him?” (NAB)
- Jesus was greatly distressed, and with a profound sigh he said, ³⁴ ‘Where have you put him?’ (NJB)
- he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, “Where have you laid him?” (NRSV)

The word translated ‘perturbed/great distressed, greatly disturbed’ is *embrimaomai*. It is a rare word, found only here and in John 11:38, and elsewhere in the NT only in Matthew and Mark. Its meaning is to “snort as an expression of rage” – which seems to be the sense here in John, i.e., become indignant, be furious. If directed at someone it means to “scold” (Mark 1:43; 14:5). The inner reaction of Jesus has a strong emotional sense – but also raised two questions: (a) in response to what/who? And (b) what has he seen in the what/who to whom he has responded?

Two interpretations of *embrimaomai* in 11:33 have been suggested. First, Jesus was ‘perturbed’ with compassion for Mary when he saw her weeping, and second, that he was ‘perturbed’ with anger. It is hard to linguistically justify the sense of “compassion.” Anger is more consistent with the word’s meaning. In the latter case there have been a number of suggestions why he was angry: (1) he was angry because of the faithless weeping and wailing of Mary and ‘the Jews’—they were grieving, as St Paul said, ‘like the rest of men, who have no hope’ (1 Thess. 4:13); (2) he was angry with death itself, the consequence of sin, which caused such pain; (3) he was angry with himself for not coming sooner to heal Lazarus and so prevent his death and the grief it caused Mary and Martha. This last suggestion is unlikely because Jesus knew he was going to raise Lazarus from death. The first suggestion has most to commend it, because the text says it was when Jesus saw Mary weeping like the rest that he became perturbed...but we often rebel at that interpretation. Why? I suspect it is because of the influence of the Lukan portrait of Mary, the one who sat at the feet of Jesus.

But this is John’s narrative. In the two sisters we have two partial ways to come to Jesus. While Martha had depth in her confession, there was little emotion. Mary has great emotion, but perhaps little depth in the knowledge of her faith. While it might appear that Mary’s tears moved Jesus to raise Lazarus, that isn’t the case. Jesus had told his disciples before they had arrived that he was coming to “wake up” “sleeping” Lazarus. He went there with the intention of raising Lazarus before either sister came to him. While both approaches are less than whole, less than complete – none the less each is a pathway to a relationship with the Lord.

The Raising of Lazarus

Upon arrival at Lazarus’ tomb, the evangelist simply tells us, *Jesus wept*. How Jesus’ weeping is interpreted depends on how his being ‘perturbed’ (33, 38) is understood as described previously. The weeping of Mary and ‘the Jews’ is denoted by the Greek word *klaiō*, found forty times in the NT and eight times in the Fourth Gospel, and very often in the context of weeping and wailing. There is only one other place in the Gospels where it is recorded that Jesus wept: when he wept (*klaiō*) over Jerusalem and its impending judgment (Luke 19:41). It may be significant that the evangelist uses a different and rare word, *dakryō*, for Jesus’ weeping in 11:35, the only place it is found in the NT.

Perhaps he is showing by his choice of this word that Jesus' weeping was of a different order from that of Mary and 'the Jews'. He was not joining with them in their weeping and wailing, but expressing his sorrow at the faithlessness he found all around him.

Seeing Jesus weep, *the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!'* They interpreted Jesus' weeping as a sign of his love for Lazarus, and grief at his death. But did the evangelist agree with them? Has he included their comment because it correctly interprets the reason for Jesus' weeping, or simply because that is what 'the Jews' thought (mistakenly) without endorsing it? Did 'the Jews' fail to realize he was weeping because of their faithlessness, not the death of Lazarus? The dead can be raised, but the faith can not be forced upon an unbeliever. They can only be given signs that they might believe.

The tomb is described as a cave (*spēlaion*), suggesting a natural cave, rather than a man-made rock tomb. When the body of the deceased, Lazarus, was put into it, a large stone was placed across the entrance, as was later to be the case when Jesus was buried (20:1).

Standing before the tomb, Jesus said, *Take away the stone*. This instruction created problems: "*Lord, by now there will be a stench; he has been dead for four days*" (v.39). Despite her earlier confession (vv.23–27) Martha was not expecting a miracle. She was concerned that the corpse by the fourth day would be starting to decompose and be giving off a bad odor. The fourth day has another significance in Jewish belief. As already mentioned, the soul of the departed was believed to stay near the body of the dead person for three days in the hope it might resuscitate. When it saw the change in the color of the face that takes place by the third day, it departed permanently. The person was then well and truly dead. That Lazarus had been in the tomb four days indicated there was no hope of resuscitation, thus highlighting the greatness of the miracle Jesus was about to perform.

Unperturbed by Martha's objection, Jesus reminded her of what he had said earlier (something not recorded by the evangelist): "*Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?*" (v.40). Addressing Martha individually (using the second-person singular) and recalling what he had said before, he urged her to focus, not upon the apparently hopeless situation of her dead brother, but upon the revelation of the glory of God about to occur. Jesus' reply was enough to satisfy Martha's objections

But before Jesus acted he prayed (vv.41-42). Jesus' prayer doesn't ask for a miracle; but is one of thanksgiving to God and meant to be overheard by those standing by. Perhaps like the Eucharistic Prayers in Mass, while they offer thanks to God, it is also a proclamation to those who overhear the prayer.

Jesus' shout "*Lazarus, come out!*" might echo Jesus' earlier words: "*Do not be amazed at this, because the hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out, those who have done good deeds to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked deeds to the resurrection of condemnation*" (John 5:28-29). What is clear is that shout (*kraugizo*) in v.43 gives life. The same word is used of the crowds shouting for Jesus' death (18:40; 19:6, 12, 15). (It's only other instance in John is 12:13 where the Palm Sunday crowd shouts their Hosannas.) It is in response to Jesus' word that Lazarus finds life. It is also in response to Jesus' word that Lazarus is freed from his restrictive bindings, by other people. Not all of God's works take place supernaturally. Sometimes they require work on our part.

Now many of the Jews who had come to Mary and seen what he had done began to believe in him. (John 11:45)