

SAINTS FOR LIFE

Is. 25:6-9; Rev. 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

The only version of the story of Lazarus in the New Testament is the one we have just read. It's a lovely story for the picture it gives us of Jesus' humanity and rather unexpected in the Gospel of John, the Gospel that is the least concerned with the humanity of Jesus.

As we have heard, Jesus arrives on the scene too late to do anything for Lazarus who has been dead for four days. Lazarus' sisters are distraught as are other people in the village, and Jesus, too, weeps for the loss of his friend. "See how he loved him!" say some of the villagers witnessing Jesus' display of emotion, though others, aware of Jesus' reputation as a healer, seem resentful that Jesus did not come soon enough to prevent Lazarus from dying, as if perhaps he had been dawdling and not sufficiently responsive to the urgency of the situation. We don't know from the story what killed Lazarus or what Jesus would have done for him. But in any case, Lazarus is dead and so dead that his body has begun to putrefy and, well, to stink.

I trust that you notice the similarities in the story of Lazarus and the story of Jesus' death and entombment. There's a stone to be rolled away and women mourners, one of whom is Lazarus' sister and to whom Jesus says as he's about to work a wonder, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" This raises the interesting question of what those who didn't believe would think, seeing Lazarus come back to life? Wouldn't it be evident to them that this was an act of God? Perhaps not.

Perhaps there were those who, seeing Lazarus come back to life, would think of this not as something from God but as a kind of wizardry on the part of Jesus, a trick he had up his sleeve.

It's at this point that the purpose of the story in John's Gospel comes clear: it is to demonstrate that Jesus is from God and that what Jesus does is God's doing. In the story, Jesus is empowered by God to resuscitate Lazarus, to bring him back to life. We must note here, though, that this is no resurrection. Dead Lazarus is brought back to life, but the day will come when he will die and this time he'll be dead for good. His rescue from death is temporary, like that of people who have been badly injured and whose vital functions stop until they are reactivated by the techniques of EMT's or emergency room personnel. But be that as it may, Mary and Martha and the villagers who have been mourning Lazarus' loss, have every reason to be glad that he is back to life again.

The distinction between resuscitation and resurrection is a significant one. Resuscitation of the dead, astounding as it is, is something that takes place before our eyes. It is something that happens in the world where we live, something within space and time. Resurrection, on the other hand, is not. Resurrection is not observable, because it is nothing that occurs in nature. Resurrection is from God and to God, and because it is not of this world, there is nothing that we can say about it. Oh, yes, I know there are preachers who will tell you that, resurrected, you will be reunited with loved ones and live in bliss and no longer troubled by the anxiety of death, that you will live on and on and on in heaven. And not just preachers, but liturgies of the church as well that seem to know details about life after death and heaven. This, so far as I can see, is whistling in the dark. We know nothing about the resurrected life. It's an utter mystery

in its beyondness. And as such, the resurrection is not something for us to be concerned about and no proper subject for religion or faith. What we *can* say, we who are an Easter people, followers of Christ whose religion and faith have their origins in the stories of Jesus' resurrection, is that God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the ending of all things. We are the creatures of God's love, and our destinies are in the God whose life is love. Be not afraid! All will be well.

In the classic Woody Allen movie, *Annie Hall*, Woody and Annie are out on their first date. They are walking on a street in Manhattan and suddenly Woody stops and faces her. "Let's kiss now and get it out of the way. I never know when to make the move and if we kiss now, we won't be anxious and we'll be able to digest our dinner better." That, I submit to you, is how we should approach the resurrection and the hope of life beyond this life. Trust the God who loves us, who is the Alpha and the Omega, to do for us whatever can be done for us, and then let's get on with our lives. We have been kissed by grace. Now, on with our lives! Here is where we practice our faith, and there is more than enough to do. In the Book of Revelation we read, "See the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be God's peoples, and God will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." The project of faith is to receive the God who comes to us, who makes a home with us in the world, the God in whom we live and move and have our being, and respond to God's presence. Jesus says to Lazarus' friends, "Unbind him, and let him go." This is what right religion does. It unbinds us, it frees us to live in the world, to practice the compassion that is the

life of faith which we have received in Christ. Right religion is about here and now and the means by which God makes all things new.

On an All Saints' Day in church, we are mindful of those we love who have gone before us and who are no longer with us. We are mindful of them, and we miss them. Think about those who have passed and whom you miss and take a moment to name their names in your heart. How nice it would be to see them again and spend time in their company! Primal religion thinks of deceased loved ones as spirits alive in the places they were known to inhabit or places they loved when they were physically alive. It is perfectly natural to do this, and I daresay that most of us probably do it too. We experience something, an object, a piece of music, a phrase, that causes us to remember deceased loved ones, and for a moment they are alive and present again—present in spirit, we might say. This is what we can have of them, a spiritual communion of saints, which is bittersweet for being only spiritual. At the same time, in the case of those who are physically with us, it all too frequently happens that we take their presence for granted and neglect our communion with them as if they will always be with us, as if there is all the time in the world for us to be together.

Well, there isn't! Recognition of this solemn fact is one aspect of an All Saints' Day. We think about the departed whom we have loved and commend them to God's keeping. Besides this, though, the day also reminds us that God is with us in this world where we mortals make our lives, and that our faith is about this world which we share with loved ones and also with neighbors who are not by nature loved ones but whom in Christ we are called to love; and that it is here that we contend with the forces of death

which are the source of human misery—things like selfishness and violence and fear, which plague us and frustrate the fullness of life in us.

When Lazarus stumbles out of his tomb, his funeral wrappings are unraveled. We might presume that he must then go and get cleaned up, smelly as he is, and that he will then have a meal and a glass of wine and receive sweet kisses from his loved ones and have a laugh and a cry and that there will be work to do and others to care for and a God who is the beginning and the ending of all things to adore and to serve. In short, Lazarus has his life to live, thanks to Jesus. And so do we. Amen.

All Saints' Day, November 1, 2009

Emanuel Lutheran Church