

LAZARUS IN SPRING

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

April 2, 2017

Let us pray (in the words of St. Francis):

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

We all know that it is no coincidence that we find ourselves in the early days of spring talking about Jesus' friend Lazarus raised from the dead. After all the rain lately, we'll be looking to get out and enjoy the sun where we can.

We seize upon the pleasures of the first warm days because they remind us of why we love life, if we're lucky enough in our health and circumstances to be able to. But Jesus, who is not always the most easygoing of saviors we could imagine, brings his disciples up short in chapter 12 of John, just after the raising of Lazarus, when he says to them, "those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

In fact, I suggest to you, it is the work of Jesus to show us how to get beyond our intense love of this life. Because, as every religious thinker and

indeed every thinking person knows, no matter how delicious this life is, the sad fact is, we are moving toward losing it. One strong element of the Christian message is how and why to deal with that reality. That's why some of the early monks kept the skulls of their brethren in their rooms: *memento mori* was their message: remember that you must die.

People from other countries look amazed at us Americans, at how fiercely we cling to life and youth. We jog compulsively through our streets like escaped prisoners. We deprive ourselves into thinness with expensive protein gruels. We get every imaginable part of our bodies liposucked and botoxed into surgically induced leanness and meanness. There's a saying about us: "Americans think they can live forever."

John's complex and moving tale of the raising of Lazarus marks the end of Jesus' public ministry. After it, events move quickly toward the cross. Clearly the author of John intends the raising of Lazarus from the dead to be in some ways a prefiguring, a dress rehearsal, for Christ's own death and resurrection. And the sense that a hostile world is closing in on Jesus is very much a part of John's storytelling. Jesus did not merely die: he was arrested and publicly executed. And the same rulers who want Jesus dead seek also to kill Lazarus, because his new life was causing others to follow Jesus.

I mention this because I believe it helps to explain something striking in the Lazarus story: Jesus' strong emotions as he deals with Lazarus' illness and

death. The New Revised Standard translation says Jesus was “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” when he saw Lazarus’ sister, Mary, weeping over Lazarus’ death. It is then that Jesus himself begins to weep, and when he comes to the tomb of Lazarus, he is again “deeply disturbed.” The Greek verb that is thus translated, scholars tell us, carries in its meaning anger as much as sorrow.

I suggest that Jesus is experiencing anger and grief over the path he knows that Lazarus—and he—are taking. He is about to raise Lazarus, through God’s action, just as he himself will be raised after his own death on the cross. Just as Jesus said, when he was told that Lazarus was deathly ill, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it,” so it will be with him. Both point, of course, in different ways, beyond physical death to another, deeper reality. Jesus says this to Martha, the other sister, when she confirms to Jesus that she believes that her dead brother “will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

Jesus’ response is one we all know: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

This is Jesus, and the writer of John, expanding the theology of the new religion of Christianity beyond its beginnings. The first Christians were sure

that Christ would return with power very soon, raise the dead, and rule over the living and dead. When this had not happened by the end of the first century, which is probably when the Gospel of John was written, the notion of the coming of the kingdom of God had to be rethought. And we have been wrestling with what it means ever since.

See and hear what Jesus says. He says, “*I am* the resurrection and the life.” Not merely that he can return life to Lazarus, but that belief in him and following him *is* resurrection itself and life itself.

It’s a feature of John’s Gospel that those around Jesus often look to his miracles as end results in themselves and not as signs of a reality whose significance goes far beyond the immediate healing. So it is with Martha. When Jesus asks her, “Do you believe this?” meaning “Do you believe that I am the resurrection and the life,” her answer is, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” But when Jesus goes to the tomb and demands that the stone be rolled away, it is Martha who hesitates. “Lord,” she says, “already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” The Gospel makes clear that the raising of Lazarus is a genuine miracle: this is no mistaken burial of a man who was really in a coma. “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

So what Jesus means by believing may not always be what we think he means or what we would like it to mean. Commentators on John point out

that the writer uses the verb for “to believe,” “to have faith” almost a hundred times in the Gospel, but that the noun meaning the state of faith or belief does not appear even once. The Gospel of John is about the process of believing, not some achieved reality. It is the journey, not the arrival, that matters.

There’s a marvelous quote from the English poet William Blake that says, “We are put on earth for a little space that we may learn to bear the beams of love.” I believe that there is a deep connection between the process of faith, which carries within it a yearning for and a working toward, the deepest kind of love, and learning to bear the beams of God’s love.

I would take the bringing together a step further and make at least one more claim for faith in God’s love: that through love we are carried beyond death. And that love, too, is something we do and learn and grow into over a lifetime, and that some kinds of love are not enough.

One of the most memorable expressions of the anguish caused by the limitations of our mortal loving comes from one of the great modern autobiographies, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory*. He writes: “Whenever I start thinking of my love for a person, I am in the habit of immediately drawing radii from my love—from my heart, from the tender nucleus of a personal matter—to monstrously remote points of the universe... When that slow-motion, silent explosion of love takes place in me, ... overwhelming me with the sense of something much vaster, much more

enduring and powerful than the accumulation of matter or energy in any imaginable cosmos, then my mind cannot but pinch itself to see if it is really awake.... I have to have all space and all time participate in my emotion, in my mortal love, so that the edge of its mortality is taken off, thus helping me to fight the utter degradation, ridicule, and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence.”

Nabokov, I suggest to you, is struggling in those words to bear the beams of love. He would be scathing in his patrician contempt to hear me say it, but he is yearning toward and apprehending God. On spring mornings like this we feel with all our hearts with St. Augustine that “Love calls us to the things of this world.” But that love is only the beginning. It points toward the greatest love that is the difficult and profound answer to our mortality, not just in this season of resurrection and rebirth, but every week of every year. Hear Jesus when he says, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

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