

## The Raising of Lazarus

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Here we are on the last Sunday before the beginning of Holy Week, a week that will begin with Palm Sunday and end with the crucifixion and entombment and the resurrection of Jesus on Easter morning.

Today's story about the death and raising of Lazarus, provides a kind of rehearsal for or parallel to Jesus's coming death and resurrection; it is a story that prepares us to have a greater understanding of what will be coming next week. It gets us thinking about what death and resurrection is all about.

And because Lazarus who is raised is an ordinary person like you or I and not so fully one with God in the way Jesus is, we get a greater sense in this story of what participation in his death and resurrection means for us. We get to see a resurrection as it is happening, and not after the fact. And we also get to witness a harrowing account of how those around him responded. And it gives us greater insight into what it will mean for us to follow Jesus through the "valley of the shadow of death" (Ps 23).

## **An Assault on Our Senses**

What is most noticeable to me is the way this story assaults our senses, especially when it comes to the experience of time. Time is stretched out into a long period of helpless waiting, that I cut out in order to keep the reading from getting too long. During that time, Jesus purposefully delay his coming and, especially for Lazarus's sister Mary, this creates an agony of despair as she watches the life seep away from her brother and awaits Jesus's coming. For Mary, time is of the essence. But when Jesus finally arrives, Lazarus is already dead.

And so when he arrives, Mary can no longer hold in her emotions. She comes to him weeping and crying out, "Where were you? Where were you when we needed you?" And someone on the side speaks out loud the deeper question that so often troubles us when we pray for a divine intervention that never seems to come. It is a question that expresses the creeping in of doubt. "if Jesus had the power to save him, then why didn't he?"

And so the story pummels us with a powerful range of emotions. There is doubt, grief, anger, helplessness, so much so that it brings Jesus

himself to weep. And, in the midst of it all there is also the unflappable and unwavering faith of Martha in conversation with Jesus.

Another thing that assaults our senses is the stench of death. Lazarus has been in the tomb four days, which is the biblical way of emphasizing that he is not sleeping, but really, really dead. And to confirm this, the story reports that His body has begun to decompose and to smell, there in the darkness of his tomb.

So, first and foremost, this is a story that deals with resurrection from actual physical death. I think that for people like myself, and perhaps you also - who have seen relatively few dead bodies and lived much of our lives with very little sense of the presence of death (in comparison with people in other times and places), it is easy to think of this story more as a way to explore how a person is liberated from a “living death” in this life; that “the death and resurrection” is a metaphor for repentance and being born anew during the course of our daily lives. And the story is clearly intended to be understood that way. But primarily, this story is about our confrontation with cold hard reality of physical death.

## The Ukraine

There is no more hard and cold reminder of the confrontation with death at this moment than the war in the Ukraine. And what I find most hairraising about it is how similar their lives were to ours only a month ago. The Ukrainian people were living much as we do, and even as Russian troops amassed at their borders, most were convinced that the horror of what is happening now could not possibly come to pass. It was unthinkable to them. And I think that in itself is a gut-check for all of us.

If we think that being American means that we can assume these things will never happen here, this is a good time to think again. And it is time to think about our faith, not just as a convenient social club, as we have all been tempted to do, or our religion as an interesting hobby; but as a source for the kind of strength and character that is required to to be a champion for life in the face of catastrophe.

And so, I can't help but associate the death of Lazarus, with the people of the Ukraine and all the people in this world who are suffering at the hands of the King Herod of our time, the indisputable butcher of thousands of innocent women and children and men, in the past month, who's name I will not defile this sacred space by uttering.

What must it be like for the people in basement bomb shelters, sleeping in unwashed sheets that may become their graveclothes or the Russian soldiers sitting in tanks that may tomorrow become their tombs. They are a mass of humanity surrounded now by the smell of death and struggling to be unbound by the grave wrappings of circumstances beyond their control.

None of them asked for this. All of them are suffering. The deaths are not hypothetical, they are real. And when help finally arrives, for tens of thousands, it is already too late and the agonized lament of Mary is repeated over and over. “Where were you, when we needed you?”

If what we are seeing on television is an assault on our senses, imagine what it is like for the people who are in the middle of it. Think of the anguish, the sense of betrayal and injustice, the unreality of the horror that the evil one can unleash upon reality. It’s not a movie. It’s not just something that happens to other people.

And yet what is so astounding to us all are the expressions of courage that pour forth from our screens out of the Ukraine. Zelensky, himself a Jew, speaks to us out of the midst of the horror with the composure

and confidence of Martha who trusts that in spite of all evidence to the contrary, life and the truth will triumph over death, He is a reminder to us, as is Mary, that where there is faith the powers of death will never win.

He reminds us of David in the face of the mighty and fearsome Goliath or of Moses and the people of Israel, when they were cornered at the Red Sea. With chariots full of Egyptian troops bearing down on them, there was nowhere to go. It was the end of the road. But God spoke to Moses, told him to lift up his staff, and the Sea itself parts before them and the people passed through.

Then Moses lifts his staff again and the sea closed over the Egyptian chariots. The bondage of the Israelites under Pharaoh's Egypt is over and the Israelites celebrate as scores of dead Egyptians wash up on the beaches (a detail that should gave us pause).

Those dead Egyptians were carrying out the Pharaoh's will, and not their own. They had families waiting in hope that they would return home. Just as many of the Russian dead are only frightened Russian youngsters, carrying out the will of their Supreme Commander. One of our own military advisor has commented that we must support a

Ukrainian strategy that quote: “keeps the flow of Body Bags going back to Russia”. It is a reminder how far our entire world is from the Kingdom of God.

These stories and the reality of what we are seeing in the Ukraine, suggest to us something about the importance of faith in the face of death. They all emphasize to us that the way to live in the face of death, is to live with the full conviction that whether we can see a way out or not, with faith in God, death will never have the last word, and that this is true no matter what happens and no matter how it appears.

Even when physical death comes, we are not compelled to see it as the end. Because, for those who believe with their whole hearts, there can be no such thing as the triumph of death. God will somehow answer in a way that denies death the victory. And ultimately, for those who believe in and are willing to lose their lives in the fight to bring about the reign of God’s love in this world, the only end can be the entry into that realm of grace that is eternal life.

