

Dead Man Walking

sermon digest

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John 11:17-44

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Like Mary Magdalene on Easter morning, Lazarus is a mystery character in the Fourth Gospel. Except for a parable in Luke 16, the name Lazarus is found only in John 11-12, nowhere in the other Gospels and in none of the epistles; Lazarus is never again mentioned in the New Testament. The sisters Mary and Martha appear in Luke 10 without reference to a brother Lazarus. However, early in the story, John identifies Lazarus' sister Mary as the woman who anointed Jesus with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair, perhaps a link to the woman from the street in Luke 7 confused with Mary Magdalene by later Christians. We are left to wonder, who were these friends from Bethany who provided hospitality to Jesus as he approached Jerusalem? Who was this man Lazarus whose death is treated with nonchalance by Jesus as a teaching event for disciples; yet, a moment that eventually brings Jesus to tears?

Because the story appears only in John, its historical authenticity has been subject to question. It would appear that someone raised from death and called out of a tomb after decomposition had begun would have been a key personality in early church documents. Serious Christians have asked, why is the rest of the New Testament ignorant of Lazarus or deliberately silent about this miracle? Perhaps a more legitimate question is why John told the story of Lazarus some sixty years after the death and resurrection of Christ.

The first eleven chapters of John, revolve around seven signs (miracles), culminating in the raising of Lazarus in John 11. Raymond Brown identified two books in John, "the book of signs" and "the book of glory." Brown located the raising of Lazarus as the transition event between the ministry of signs and the concluding glorification of Christ in his cross and resurrection. The final sign, the death and raising of Lazarus, is preparation for the death and resurrection of Jesus. The scripture selection of the Common Lectionary seems to agree, placing the Lazarus story during Lent rather than Easter.

However, the chronology of the Lazarus story may well belong in the early Christian struggle with the continuation of death rather than as a prelude to the cross and resurrection of Christ. Maybe the historicity of Lazarus is the wrong issue. Perhaps we have been asking the wrong question. The problem with death continued after Easter. If the death of Lazarus brought Jesus to tears, how shall we respond to the death of the people we love?

After Easter, how shall we respond to death? At the death of Lazarus, "Jesus wept." We can only speculate that Jesus was not defective in faith and that the death and resurrection of Jesus had long been basic to the faith of Christians at the time John was written. John addressed the same contradiction that I find present in the church today. While we celebrate the victory of Christ over death and sing "Up from the Grave He Arose," the saints of God continue to die along with cynics and scoundrels, and I might add, along with birds of the air and animals of the field. Where does Lazarus fit in this experience?

Playwright Eugene O'Neill wrote "Lazarus Laughed" in 1925 as a sequel to John's story, creating a fictitious response of the first century world to one raised from death. O'Neill had no intention of writing a serious interpretation of John's Gospel; however, he raised the question most asked by New Testament scholars: what happened to Lazarus?

O'Neill imagined a messianic figure in the church, a celebrity surrounded by awe. Beginning with family and friends, everyone wants Lazarus to bring word from the grave and answer the question, what is death? Eventually Lazarus gains the attention of Emperor Tiberius; and Lazarus responds with laughter, a holy, contagious laughter, and declares that there is no death, only the laughter of God. The laughter of Lazarus, however, was a threat to the Roman system. The fear of death was the key to Roman power. Finally, Tiberius must demonstrate his ultimate authority over Lazarus. He declares Lazarus to be a demon and orders execution by fire to prove both the reality and certainty of death. But as Lazarus is dying, Tiberius, knowing that he too must die, pleads for a final word from the grave, and Lazarus speaks only of "God's eternal laughter."

My first Sunday in Oak Ridge, we arrived at church to find that one of our young men Danny Thompson had been killed in an automobile accident the night before. In addition, the word was buzzing that Mary Agnes Kyker had received a terminal diagnosis of lung cancer. In the coming

months we took several hard blows from the death of saints in our congregation, so I gathered grieving friends to walk together in mutual support. We read Granger Westberg's little book *Good Grief*, an exposition on grief that describes the experience of loss in the death of loved ones. Westberg challenged the common assumption that real Christians should not grieve. He observed the fragmentary quotation of 1 Thessalonians 4:13, commanding Christians to "grieve not." Westberg suggested (p. 17) that we read the whole sentence: "'Grieve not as those who have no hope,' and then I would add, 'but for goodness' sake, grieve when you have something worth grieving about.'"

One member of the group shared a brochure from TV preacher Kenneth Copeland "Exposing The Deadly Nature of Grief" that demonstrated Westberg's issue exactly. Copeland declared, "Grief and sorrow are dangerous things. . . . They are actually spirit beings sent by the devil himself to kill, steal, and destroy." According to Copeland, after Easter, Christians are not supposed to grieve the death of our friends and loved ones. Jesus was supposed to end grief on the cross, so people of true faith do not grieve.

If Copeland is right, I wonder why Martha complained about the delay in Jesus' arrival. Even though she expressed her faith in the resurrection "on the last day" and affirmed her faith in Jesus, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world," Martha grieved the death of her brother. When Jesus saw Mary weeping in faith, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," Jesus began to weep. Why did Jesus join her grief? "Jesus wept," the famous short verse in the Bible simply states the case without commentary or explanation. It appears, however, that Jesus grieved with Mary, and the Jewish observers commented, "See how he loved him!" There is no hint of sin or evil or a lack of faith in the grief of Martha, Mary, or Jesus. Even hostile observers saw grief as welling up out of love.

When Jesus went to the tomb of Lazarus, he was "greatly disturbed," implying strong anger. Anne Robertson suggests that Jesus' emotional response of grief included anger at death and its intrusion on God's gift of life: "Jesus here rails at the unfairness of death and cries with each of us who has wept at the grave of a loved one" (*Interpretation*, 58, no. 2, April, 2004, p. 176). Jesus never condemns grief. Rather, he grieves with Martha and Mary and all of the post-Easter Christians who expected Jesus to bring an end to death. Martha and Mary protest directly to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." They believed that the presence of Jesus should have been enough to prevent death; but he delayed coming to Lazarus, just as he seems to have delayed coming back again after Easter to end the reign of death. As the sisters protest death to Jesus, Jesus raises his anger at death before the face of his enemies and the patience of God.

After Easter, we need to go to war with death. The key passage in the story of Lazarus, usually read in committal services at grave sides, is Jesus' response to Martha (John 11:25): Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live." The Lazarus story belongs to our time, after Easter. After Easter, death and grief continued in the church, just as death has intruded on our faith experience. The story of Lazarus undergirds the Christian hope of the resurrection: "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live."

Helen Prejean's 1982 experience as spiritual advisor to an inmate on Death Row in Louisiana State Prison emerged in 1993 as a book *Dead Man Walking: The Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty That Sparked a National Debate*. A native of Louisiana, Sister Helen Prejean is a Catholic nun whose deep faith history is pro-life, a Catholic opposition to war and abortion as well as to capital punishment. The title of the book adopts the chilling words shouted by prison guards to clear the hallway as a condemned prisoner is walked to his death. In the process of working with the convicted rapist and killer of two teenage lovers Patrick Sonnier, he convinces her of his innocence of the murders. She manages to gain a pro-bono attorney and an appeal to his death sentence to no avail. However, in his last words before death, he finally confesses with remorse his guilt to the families of his victims before his death.

In the final moment, the State sanctioned death of this terrifying and terrorized man was not about his guilt or innocence; it was about his humanity even in the face of his inhumane crime. Sister Prejean wrote another book in 2006, *The Death of Innocents: An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Executions*, seeking the end of death as the final solution to criminal behavior.

We cannot escape the reality that the dead man walking in the Lazarus story is not only about Lazarus walking out of the tomb; it is about Jesus walking toward the cross. This is the point in John's Gospel when the enemies of Christ resolve to bring an end to his mission. Although we might be prone to support capital punishment for people who are guilty of heinous crimes, we cannot escape two basic facts: (1) Jesus, an innocent offender, was the victim of capital punishment; (2) an imperfect system of justice has neither right nor justification for exercising perfect, that is, terminal justice. John J. Curtin, Jr., a former BBA President testifying before Congress as President of the American Bar Association expressed his opposition to the death penalty: "Whatever you think about the death penalty, a system that will take life must first give justice." Perhaps you have heard that the Richards, parents of the youngest victim of the Boston Marathon bombing have appealed to the court not to answer violence with violence. They have expressed their opposition to the death penalty for the man who killed their eight-year-old son.

In this age of violence and terrorism, death comes too easy in our world. As we proclaim life in the Easter celebration, let us vow a war on unnecessary death.