

Mourning Glory

John 11:1-7, 32-45

There are some stories in the Gospels which have so many layers of meaning, it is hard to interpret them coherently. The narrative just read of the raising of Lazarus fits this description. Unlike most miracle stories associated with Jesus that are brief and to the point, this narrative goes on for fifty-seven verses, with so many episodic elements to it that it would take half of my allotted time in the pulpit merely to read it in full.

It's hard to know exactly what the Gospel writer had in mind when scripting the plot—what his grand plan was in developing the drama. Traditionally, most interpreters have assumed it was intended, symbolically, to be a summary of Jesus' life and a foreshadowing of his death and resurrection, which makes perfect sense, given many of the same elements are found throughout the Gospel: the story begins with Jesus at the Jordan, then to his life among his disciples and the poor, his appeal to those in need of healing, the death, mourning, three days passing, and finally an empty tomb, with Lazarus rising from the dead. All those elements are carefully included in the spiritual biography of Jesus' life. That they are once again captured here in this single chapter is enough for any of us to stop and ponder the meaning of what the writer of John has done in the telling of Lazarus' story. We are right to ask (as many have done down through the ages), how do Lazarus and Jesus parallel each other?

However, as is often true with the writer of John, there are other reasons for us to recognize that maybe the meaning doesn't just

rest solely on how Lazarus and Jesus parallel each other, or for that matter what would happen to Jesus in the days and weeks to come. In fact, on another level it's fair to say this story isn't meant to be about Jesus foreshadowing his destiny, but rather, a metaphor about someone and something else. What that is, is suggested by some of the details.

Let me add, I also join many scholars who question the likelihood that this episode involving a man named Lazarus ever occurred, which is to say, the writer of John may well have created it in order to make a particular claim about Jesus' mission (a common thing to do in ancient literature). A good reason to question the authenticity of its occurrence is because, if this were an actual recorded event in Jesus' life, one would assume it would have figured prominently in the other gospel accounts. To raise someone from the dead was no small matter, as it would still astound us today. Why is it that only John tells of Lazarus' rising—a miracle John later claims brought Jesus much notoriety? Why is it not referenced anywhere else in the entire New Testament, if in fact Jesus did this remarkable deed? Those are questions that probably deserve to be answered before we just presume this is a reporter's eyewitness account of what occurred. So then, what does it mean?

As I see it, a reasonably good entry point for getting at what this story is attempting to tell us is with the name, Lazarus, and the location for where he and his sisters, Mary and Martha, live. The name, Lazarus, is a variation of Eleazar which in Hebrew (or Aramaic) means, "he whom God helps." Where Lazarus came from was the village of Bethany, which translated means, "house of

affliction/poverty;” it refers to a village located outside of the walls of Jerusalem where it’s likely the poor and those who suffered from various afflictions dwelled. Though it’s difficult to pinpoint it’s precise location 2,000 years later, it’s likely that it would have been out of the sight-line from the Jerusalem temple, out of concern that both poverty and illness were a form of spiritual uncleanness, meaning they were ritually impure. The reality of Bethany would have been an offense to the moral conscience, similar to how people today view a “blighted” neighborhood. In Bethany, a likely sight would have been an almshouse, where religious pilgrims would have stopped to offer their charity before entering through the gates of Jerusalem.

What reinforces this symbolism and association between Lazarus and poverty and affliction is that in the Christian canon, the name, Lazarus, shows up only in John in reference to this story and in one other place, i.e., the parable of the rich man and Lazarus recorded in Luke (16:19-31). What is particularly interesting to me is that in Luke’s parable, it’s clear that the name, Lazarus, is symbolic and meant to be representative of poverty and suffering, since it stands in contrast to a demanding and arrogant rich man, who garners no sympathy. Luke makes Jesus’ critique quite pointed in that the poor man is identified by the name, Lazarus, while the rich man remains completely nameless—a very intentional and satirical flip from the custom where the wealthy were few in number, highly valued and admired, and widely known by their name throughout society (e.g., a first century Trump, Buffett, Carnegie, Rockefeller, etc.), while the poor were legion, expendable, and virtually nameless. But in Luke’s

parable, it's the poor man who was named, while the wealthy man remained unidentified. One would take that to mean, between Luke's parable and John's story, the one named, Lazarus, is representative of the poor of the earth, and they are the ones whom God helps and Jesus loves.

This story in John builds upon the fact that Lazarus was ill (again, a common association with poverty and with Bethany) and, being poor, he may have had no access to the few urban physicians who might have provided some remedy or relief. Medical science, to the degree it existed, was influenced by the great Hippocrates, but it was far from being a source of much help. So his only hope would have been a local folk healer, which was how the healing touch of Jesus was viewed.

What is startling in this story, though, is that Jesus didn't immediately come to his aid—surprising, especially since Lazarus was considered a beloved friend. Not only did Jesus delay in coming to Bethany to help him survive, he refused to go until Lazarus was already dead for three days, ensuring that no resuscitation was possible (the ancient belief being that the spirit remained with the body for three days and departed for Sheol on the fourth day).

Now if this were only a story about one man, it would certainly be memorable, but offer little hope and impact beyond Lazarus and his immediate family. Therefore, as I mentioned earlier, Lazarus symbolized and represented the state of the poor—people who were inhumanely treated by society, considered expendable and worthless, and scornfully judged by both their fellow humans and, by inference, God. Since human suffering was believed to be the result of sin and

immorality, at this point of the story the state of Lazarus' life was one that reflected absolute hopelessness on earth and eternal despair on the Last Day.

So what we have here, then, is not a story about Jesus as much as it was about hopelessness—of godforsakenness—for even Jesus, the friend of the poor, failed to care enough to show up and save Lazarus. For those who exist in this state, who barely survive, let alone enjoy a quality of life with abundance and good health, there was little that occurred that suggested life could change for the better.

This makes me pause, because this isn't merely an ancient cause for despair. It reminds me of the state of so many souls on earth today who have little to hope for in life. The pleasures and advantages you and I enjoy are so far distant to their daily reality that the only hope they have is in some other life—some heavenly reward. Have you noticed how it tends to be those who on the lower end of the economic spectrum who are the most fervently religious in our society? When you're poor and life is hard, you don't look for promises in this world, you look ahead to the next one where your religious hope is an eternal reward. That's why there is so much hope placed in an everlasting life, because if you were poor on earth, it's pretty certain your will be a short-lived one. A promise of eternity is a statement on the quantity and quality of your life in the present! When your life is hard, so difficult to manage, so plagued with problems that there is little hope for improvement on this side of heaven, then you pine for the promises of eternity.

So, who are these that exist on the margins today, much like Lazarus lived on the underside of his world? They are low-wage

workers who cannot make ends meet no matter how many hours they are on the job; they are single mothers caring for children, without help from fathers who are in prison, or won't show up or give a damn. They are combat veterans who return home only to relive the violence, death, and fear of war every moment of their waking lives, estranged from meaningful relationships and from a society that can't understand their trauma and pain. They are sex workers, exploited by many and cared for by few; they are addicts and alcoholics, dysfunctional in many aspects of life. It's those who are mentally ill, malnourished, homeless, jobless, undocumented, undereducated, those who are dying from treatable conditions, those who suffer with stigma falling between the cracks of justice and charity, who few know by name or by circumstance. They are the vulnerable of this world condemned to a life of poverty and hardship along the margins, away from the mainstream, never truly experiencing life in its abundant blessings because they were born in the wrong place, or at the wrong time, or with the wrong luck, or around the wrong people—marginal lives easily forgotten and expendable because they were rarely known to us or within our realm of concern. These are the Lazaruses of our world. So why shouldn't they be hopeless and filled with despair?

These are the ones Jesus wept for when he went to Lazarus' tomb, those who stand little chance at having a decent life because life isn't decent to them. They are the ones who are drawn to Pentecostal promises of a better life in the resurrection, in the sweet-by-and-by because the abundant life apparently isn't meant to be for them on this side of heaven. And there are so many others who look upon

them with disdain and comment to their own kind: “Good! Let them die, for it will help to decrease the surplus population!”

Yet, if that had been their intended lot in life, if eternity was meant to be the poor’s only hope, then Jesus would have left Lazarus alone and at peace in his tomb. He would have comforted the sisters with the promise of the resurrection, then left a flower at the grave and gone on his way, if that’s all the hope of God he could muster. Lazarus was already dead; his spirit was gone. There was no memory of his earthly existence other than with the handful of friends with whom he shared his short and pathetic life. There would be no headlines, no obituary printed up in the *Jerusalem Post*, no mention of him to anyone on the other side of the wall. Because everyone standing by the tomb knew his life didn’t matter; it was expendable, the world would go on quite fine without him—without another excuse to take advantage of some good soul’s charity.

But apparently, that’s not the message of this story; it’s not the way it works in God’s realm, which is why Jesus went to the grave, rolled back the rock, and called Lazarus back to life! It wouldn’t be the graves of the rich and mighty that he would open. It would be the poor whom Jesus knew as his friends, the nameless ones who he knew as Lazarus, the one whom God helps! What this story tells us is that Jesus breathed life into them in a way that no one else had ever experienced!

Like Ezekiel’s vision, when life came back into his body, when the spirit was revived, Lazarus got up out of his grave, from the hopelessness and despair of lives just like his to upset the well-

ordered state of the Jerusalem world and all its proper customs about who is deserving and who is not!

Someday, the same thing is going to occur in this country to reverse the trend we are presently in where we tolerate and accept the expendability of certain classes—where we make things easy on the rich and so much harder for the poor. Someday, the Lazaruses of our world will have their graves opened, and those of us who are with them, who witness their rising, will unbind them, and set them free, just like Jesus commanded us to do!

Do you realize, remarkably, this brings us back full circle to the traditional interpretation of Lazarus' story—that it foreshadows the resurrection of Jesus? For the rising of Lazarus is meant to be tied into what happens on Easter day. Except, in our teachings and religious tradition, we had it backward—the cart before the horse, let's say. For Jesus' resurrection was meant to be a foreshadowing of the rising of Lazarus on earth that will yet occur! The story about the death that could not defeat Jesus' spirit on the cross offers a foretaste of the future—a future that is still unfolding and not in heaven, but on earth—a future when the last shall become first, when the poor will receive good news, the enslaved will go free, and those who have been blind to all of this oppression and violence, will finally have eyes to see it and hearts to end it!

That would be the day when mourning would finally give way to glory for all the Lazaruses of our world! It would be when the will of God, as it is already being done in heaven, will finally be done on earth! Heaven doesn't need to be the place where it all works out! There are no graves that need to be opened in heaven. The graves

that oppress people exist here on earth! This is where lives of misery are meant to be redeemed! This is where eternal hope lies!

Mourning glory—the intentional, courageous, and faithful movement from present mourning to future glory, where no more tears, no more needless and shameful suffering, no more nameless victims remain; where

...Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. (Rev. 21:4)

Yes they will, yes they will! For our eyes will have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

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