

## **“Post-Mortem Life”**

### **John 11: 1-44**

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You may have felt what I did on reading this story. It seems to operate on two levels, and we get confused when we try to put them together. On one level it's a story about God's glory and God's timing, and God's victory over death. Jesus waits around because this illness is for God's glory. When Lazarus dies, he's only sleeping and Jesus is going to awaken him. When Martha comes to point out his obvious failure to get there in time, Jesus launches into a great theological statement on how he is the resurrection and the life. Then when he gets to the grave, Jesus puts on this great show of a prayer, like he and the Father had this thing planned all along, and now he's going to show everyone that he has the power to unlock the gates of death. That's one level, you might call it the divine level.

But then we trip over another level all together. We find out that Jesus loved Martha and Mary and Lazarus, but he remained for two more days where he was. And when he finally arrives on the scene, he confronts the grief and pain his delay has caused. Both sisters remind him, perhaps even reproach him, with the fact that had he been more prompt, Lazarus might not have died. If Jesus had responded with the declaration that this was all in God's good plan, that would be one thing, but what he does is get emotionally distraught and weeps.

What's going on here? Just when we're ready to see the whole thing through the lens of God's timing and God's glory, we get jerked into the agonizing maelstrom of human feelings. Just when we are soothed by Jesus lofty affirmation-- "whoever lives and believes in Jesus will never die"-- we are confronted with death's awful reality, the sobs and the stink of it all.

We shouldn't be surprised. In John's gospel there are always two levels of meaning. In this gospel Jesus performs seven miraculous "signs" (not just miracles, but signs). In each sign there are two levels. On one level Jesus provides for some concrete physical need. He makes water into wine to continue the wedding celebration. He heals sick people. He feeds hungry crowds with bread. He gives sight to the blind. But each one of these is also a sign that points to a deeper spiritual gift Jesus gives. Jesus is the wine of the Kingdom of God. Jesus is the bread of life, the health of our souls, Jesus is the light of the world that penetrates our spiritual blindness. In John's gospel, the raising of Lazarus is the final and culminating sign. There is a physical resurrection. On that level we learn about the outrage of death. On that physical level Lazarus' stinking body is raised from the grave and restored to his loving family. But there is

another whole layer of meaning. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. He brings eternal life to those who love him and believe in him.

This bi-level world, when you think about it, this is exactly the world we live in as Christians. We live in this ordinary world of life and death, of laughter and tears; a world where things can happen too late, and where bodies begin to stink.

But as Christians, as people of faith, we also live in another world, God's world. We live on a visited planet, where God has landed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. We live in a universe where death is defeated, where eternal life has been declared, where God's timing always works, and where stinking bodies stumble out of graves.

Now these are not two different worlds, the one "spiritual" and the other "natural". They are one in the same world, a bi-level world, a world where God is at work in the ordinary experience of time and tears. In this remarkable story Jesus lives on both levels, and he teaches us how to do the same.

On one level it's a story about death, and its painful trail of grief and loss. When Jesus finally arrives at Bethany, when he confronts death's searing reality in the grief of Mary and Martha and their neighbors and friends, Jesus' composure crumbles. It's quite striking that not just once, or twice, but three times, John pictures Jesus in deep emotional pain as death's stark reality rips open his heart. Not only does Jesus weep, He also erupts with rage, that helpless, powerless feeling many of us have felt in the face of death. So, on his way to the grave where he intends to raise Lazarus from the dead, Jesus deeply grieves and hot tears line his face.

In those tears, and in that emotional turmoil, Jesus teaches us about death, and how we should respond to it in this bi-level world. He validates our own gut-level response to death.

"If you had been there, my brother would not have died." Why does God so often show up late? How many times hasn't that thought shadowed our grieving hearts? Where were you when we needed you? Why did you allow this to happen? Or listen to the crowds: "Could not he who opened up the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" It's a real question, a tough question, and I'm glad that it's not just some shameful question buried in our hearts. The gospel itself raises the question. And that validates our own questions and struggles with Jesus' seeming absence at critical times in our lives.

Like Mary and Martha, we feel the stabbing pain of grief and loss, and that's why Jesus sobs and groanings, his salty tears, have been so precious to Christian down through the

centuries. Our Savior is also our fellow sufferer. The one who promises life and resurrection shows us the tracks of his tears. It is right, it is true, it is good, it is godly, therefore, when we ask hard questions, and weep in anger, frustration, and heart-broken loss. Let no one dry your tears before they stop. Let no one ever imply that your grief somehow don't fit the contours of your faith. Let no one stifle your heart-broken questions. That's one level of the bi-level world in which we Christians live, and Jesus lives there right with us.

But there's another level of this story and we live there too. This is not just a story about Jesus' tearful empathy with those trapped in grief and pain. Nor is it just a story about a man who dies, and everyone has a good cry, and then, *voila*, there's a happy ending when he is raised again from the dead. John's point is not that there is one spot called Camelot where cripples are healed, the blind are made to see, and the dead raised..

That other level of the story becomes especially apparent in Jesus stunning conversation with Martha. She too suggests that if he had been there, here brother would not have died. Jesus replies, "Your brother will rise again." What Martha hears from Jesus is a sort of conventional religious truth held by many of her fellow Jews, that in the end there will be a resurrection of the dead.

Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote a powerful and moving book after the death of his son Eric at age 24 in a mountain climbing accident. At one point he says, "Elements of the gospel which I had always thought would console me did not. They did something else, something important, but not that. It did not console me to be reminded of the hope of the resurrection. If I had forgotten that hope, then it would indeed have brought light into my life to be reminded of it. But I did not think of death as a bottomless pit. I did not grieve as one who had no hope. Yet Eric is gone, here and now he is gone. Now I cannot talk with him, now I cannot see him, now I cannot hug him.... That is my sorrow." That was Martha's sorrow too. Yes, she had learned her Catechism, Lazarus would rise at the last day. Somehow that was cold comfort when what she wanted was to hug him today.

It's right there that Jesus utters a word that shouts across the millennia with its abiding truth and power: "*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." And it's right here that we confront the other level of meaning on which we are called to live our lives in this broken world.

In John's gospel "eternal life" is not just about, or is even mainly about what we call life after death. For Jesus, eternal life is a quality of life that we enjoy here and now. Whenever someone believes in Jesus, at that moment he or she moves into a new dimension of life, abundant life, eternal life. Jesus is life itself. To know him, and believe in him is to participate in that overflowing, eternal life. Listen to how Jesus puts it in John 5, "Very truly I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life". Jesus point is precisely that eternal life is not some far off prize we will get some day when we die. Eternal life is right here and now. It begins now and it goes on forever. The closer you are to Jesus, the more life you have. We have already been raised from death to life.

For Christians, in a very real sense, life right now is post-mortem, it's life after death. Paul had a very vivid sense that through faith and baptism, we have already died. "You died" he writes to the Colossians, "and your life is now hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life appears, you also will appear with him in glory." (Col. 3:3,4) When we believed in Christ we died in him. We were drowned in baptism. We passed from death to life.

Woody Allen was once asked whether he sought to achieve immortality through his many films. "I don't want to gain immortality through my work. I want to gain immortality by not dying"

It's not just escaping death that Jesus proclaims, but a life that death cannot destroy, a life that is eternally vital and rich and free. Thomas Lynch, an unusually thoughtful funeral director, commented in a recent New York Times op ed piece on the fact that while people are living significantly longer lives, they seem to enjoy diminishing returns. "With the extra three decades [of life we have gained in the last century] we neither cured the common cold, nor secured peace in the Balkans, but we did invent the Wonderbra, and no-load mutual funds. With all this extra time to kill, we went to war more than any of the short-lived generations before us. We also golfed more and watched more sitcoms and built more and safer and more fuel efficient Buicks and Boeings that got us farther and faster to more distant places that seemed, once we got there, more crowded somehow. If our great grandchildren will have to wait till ninety for the hard won sense that came to us at forty five, if they must endure double the incremental damages of serial monogamy, the 24 hour news cycle, easy listening music, and infomercials, no amount of Ritalin or Prozac or Viagra will make them well, however fit they seem at age 150."

The eternal life Jesus promises to those who believe in him sets us free, not merely to extend our banal existence in this broken world, but to really live, walking with Christ in love

and service. We don't have to grab life and hold it tightly. Assured of eternal life in Christ, we can afford to let go, to give it away. When we live the post-mortem life, we are free from the shackles of hurrying to do everything we possibly can, filling our lives with things and activities. We are set free to live lives of self-giving love here and now. Life's deeply precious and piercingly beautiful moments are not lost forever, rather they point us to an eternal life, the staggering beauty of which we can scarcely imagine. If you've already died; if death holds no more terror for you, then you are free to live this preparatory life freely and deeply and fully. Nicholas Wolterstorff tells of a colleague who, recovering from a heart attack, remarked, "I wouldn't have missed it for the life of me.:" He experienced the thrill and spiritual vitality of post-mortem life.

We live in two worlds, we live a bi-level life. We live in a world dominated by death. We still feel its icy grip, and weep with grief and rage when it stalks our lives. But we live in another world too, the mighty gravitational orbit of the one who is the resurrection and the life, who is life itself. United to him by faith and baptism, death is not the end at all, but the beginning. It's long dark corridor becomes a birth canal through which these fetal life forms who have lived so long in the constricted womb of this world, move into the light of the real world and into the hands of the our loving Creator.

You see, Lazarus is a picture of all of us trapped in this world dominated by sin and death. We are all tightly bound in the shroud of death, the pain and the tears, the doubts and questions which squeeze our faith almost to the breaking point. But today we hear the liberating, death-defying word of Christ. "Lazarus, come out!"

Jesus asks Martha the most important question of the whole passage. "Do you believe this?" And that's the question he asks all of us. Do you believe that I am the resurrection and the life? Do you believe that even though you die, you will live, and when you live and believe in me, you will never really die? Do you believe this? When you believe that, you live in two worlds. You live in this world of pain and death and sorrow, you smell the sink of death. But you also live in the new creation, that inexhaustible and eternal vitality of the Son of God, in whom you have life, abundant life, now and forever. That's the beginning of post-mortem life.

There an old evening hymn I love which puts it just right:

*Teach me to live that I may dread*

*the grave as little as my bed.*

*Teach me to die that so I may  
rise glorious at the judgment day.*