
Do You Believe This?

John 11:1-44

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 5 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

Every morning on ESPN there is a countdown of the top ten plays of the previous day's sporting contests. We see the best touchdown, the best basket, the best home run. And every now and again we see a move that has everything that sport has to offer – speed, skill, teamwork, surprise and success. I want to suggest to you that if on the last day the heavenly equivalent of ESPN put together its top ten moments in salvation history, the raising of Lazarus would be up there – because it has everything.

The gospel of John locates itself at the center of time. Its prologue harks back to the creation itself, with the words, “in the beginning”. Jesus' incarnation as the word made flesh is the fulfillment of the logic of creation, in which the word made the world. And by concluding with Jesus' resurrection John's gospel anticipates the end of time, the final moment of resurrection for all that God transforms to be in the presence of the Trinity for ever. So in 21 chapters John's gospel gives us a mini version of everything from the beginning of time to the end.

And the raising of Lazarus comes in John chapter 11, the central chapter out of the 21 chapters. This story is right at the center of time. And it tells the story of how Jesus crosses three thresholds to bring about resurrection. At the beginning of the story, verse 7 tells us, Jesus is outside Judaea. There is much talk about why Jesus takes so long to come to Lazarus' aid. Think about what this might mean in the context of the whole gospel, of salvation history. Jesus crossing into Judaea is like Jesus coming to earth and becoming incarnate. In both cases there is a strange delay. Why didn't God come among us in Jesus the first time anything went wrong? Listen to these words from verse 4 as we contemplate the many situations of suffering and sadness in our world today: “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.” Jesus crosses the threshold into Judaea, he comes into the life of the world, and as his disciples point out in verse 8, the Judaeans, that's to say the Jerusalem authorities, are out to get him.

The second threshold Jesus crosses in verse 17 is that he comes to Bethany. We can see a close correspondence between the role of Bethany in this story and the role of Israel in the whole story of the gospel. Why doesn't Jesus come to the whole world? Because he's a real human being, who can only be in one place at a time. Why does he come to Israel, why does he come to Martha and Mary, rather than any other nation or people? Because God loves Israel, just as we're told in verse 5 that Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. And what does Jesus do in Bethany – what does he do in Israel? He meets people's needs and he speaks the truth. As verse 30 reminds us, Jesus spent most of his time on the outskirts of the village – and on the outskirts of Israel. He had disclosed his purpose before he came to earth and before he came to the center of Israel by his proclamation in the Old Testament and his proclamation and ministry in Galilee.

The third threshold Jesus crosses in verse 38 is that he comes to the tomb. And here we can see the correspondence between the place of the tomb in this story and the place of Jerusalem in the gospel story. It's the place of horror and the place of transformation. It's the place of impurity and yet the place where, Jesus says in verses 4 and 40, we shall see the glory of God. At this point we realize that Jesus has performed six miracles prior to this central moment in John's gospel. He turned water into wine, he healed the official's son in Cana, he healed the lame man at the pool of Bethzatha, he fed the five thousand, he walked on water, he healed the man born blind. We're about to witness the perfect seven.

So this story tells us everything about the gospel of John, and everything about how the gospel of John fits into the whole story of God. But that's not all it tells us. It shows us everything about Jesus. First of all it tells us he's fully human. He loves Lazarus, and he loves Martha and Mary. He loves them so much and he finds the chaos of opposition and grief and misunderstanding and responsibility and power so overwhelming that in verse 33 his whole body is convulsed with passion. The words in this translation don't do it justice by saying he was disturbed and deeply moved. It's better to say he shuddered and was transfixed: this was a whole body experience. It's telling us that there was nothing in Jesus' body mind or spirit that was not overcome by the intensity of this moment. Again, it reinforces that this is the center of the gospel story. And then in verse 35 we have one of the most famous verses in Scripture perhaps because it's one of the shortest: “Jesus wept”. Why did

he weep? Well, of course because he loved Lazarus. But don't miss the irony of the words that immediately precede this verse. In John chapter one the words "Come and see" are the way Jesus invites his first followers into the journey of discipleship. "Come and see" becomes the clarion call to follow Jesus. And here in verse 34 these very words are said *to* Jesus, and they are a reminder to him and to us that discipleship leads to the tomb.

So this story shows us that Jesus is fully human – but it also shows us that Jesus is fully divine. What the story takes for granted is that no one – you, me, or anyone in the modern or ancient world – has ever seen anything like this, a man in the tomb for four days, bound in the clothes of death, walking out of that tomb alive. Only God can do this. But the divinity doesn't just lie in the miracle. The human drama of this story, with all its emotion and surprise and horror and glory, is in some ways only a backdrop to the drama of Jesus' relationship with his Father. In spite of the grief, in spite of the stench, in spite of the hostility, in spite of the horror, Jesus insists in verse 40 that this story in its beginning and ending is always a story about God: "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" When you consider Jesus' shuddering and being convulsed in the light of his relationship with his Father, you can see that these profound physical and emotional reactions are not just the essence of his humanity but the essence of his divinity. He is bearing in his body the full weight of his relationship with the Father. This is an anticipation of the cross, and, like the cross, it is a prefiguration of resurrection. And so when Jesus speaks directly to the Father in verse 41-2, they are words almost of relief: "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." They remind us of Jesus' last words on the cross, "It is finished", and they anticipate John's last words in chapter 20, where he says that the gospel has been written "so that you may believe".

So this story tells us everything about John's gospel and everything about Jesus. But there's more. It tells us everything about life and death. If John chapter 11 is the center of John's gospel, then Jesus' conversation with Martha in verses 21 to 27 are the center of the center. Martha said to Jesus, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "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. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." The resurrection *and* the life. When Jesus says "I am the resurrection", he is saying "I am the *power* of God overcoming evil and death". When Jesus says "I am the life", he is saying "I am the *love* of God making possible new relationships, new communities, new possibilities for human flourishing and worship and joy". You've heard it from me before and you'll hear it again, that the American church is divided between those who think it's all about power and those who think it's all about love. Some want to read just "I am the resurrection" and stick to believing the right things and concentrating on eternal salvation. And others want to read just "I am the life" and major on creating a just society and sticking with issues in this present world. But Jesus says "I am the resurrection *and* the life" – I am about doctrine *and* justice, about this world *and* the next, about the individual *and* about community and society, about power *and* love.

And finally this story tells us everything about discipleship. The story is a training manual in what it means to be a saint. The disciple prays to God in an attitude of need and expectation. Is this the way you pray? Need and expectation. Mary and Martha express need in the words in verse 3, "Lord, he whom you love is ill". And they express expectation in the words in verse 22, "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." As disciples of Jesus today we stand before him in need and expectation. Saints don't expect that they and those they love will never suffer, will never be bewildered or disappointed: but they do expect that if they believe, they will see the glory of God. They empty their hearts of the self-deception that prevents them expressing their need, and they empty their lives of the inhibition that prevents them articulating their expectation. The more we are around Jesus, the more we become aware of our need of him, and the more reason we have to expect that he will transform us and the whole of reality. We also discover in this story that discipleship involves danger. In verse 8 the disciples recall that Jesus' enemies tried to stone him last time he went to Judaea. In verse 16 Thomas faces up to the reality more than any other disciple in the gospel and says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Being a saint means dying with Jesus.

And we discover that discipleship means being with Jesus in the face of disgust and fear. Jesus says in verse 39, "Take away the stone". Martha protests that surely this has got beyond a joke. You may be the resurrection and

the life and all that, but you're not going to expose us to that kind of stench? You cannot be serious! Jesus says, in as many words, "Are you going to let your bourgeois sense of propriety stop you seeing the glory of God?" (Not a bad question for us to ask ourselves as we read this story today.) Saints discover that the most important work of God seems to happen in places where the smell is pretty bad.

There are a couple more things this story shows us about discipleship. In Martha we see that discipleship involves expressing faith in Jesus. It's not clear whether the story would have continued had Martha not made her response of faith to Jesus in verse 27. What's more transparent is that those who don't believe don't get to see the glory of God. They may see the stunt, they may see the drama. But they don't get to see the glory.

And then at the end of the story we see how disciples are to respond to the miracle that Christ performs. This is the way God makes us into saints. Remember at the end of the feeding of the five thousand the disciples' job was to make sure everyone got enough and to clear up afterwards and ensure that nothing was wasted? Well here it's similar. The instructions in verse 44 are "unbind him and let him go". When you learn Greek the first word you learn is *luo* – which means "I loose". You think you're learning it because it's the simplest verb. But one day you find your way to the end of the central story in the story that is itself the story at the center of the world. And at the end of this story you find this word with which you began your studies. And you find it doesn't just mean loose, it means unbind. And it doesn't just mean unbind, it means set free. And it doesn't just mean set free it means forgive. And it doesn't just mean forgive it means be a participant in resurrection. It means the whole gospel.

So now you see why I said at the beginning the raising of Lazarus is one of those stories they play over and over again in heaven because it's a highlights package of salvation history and at the center of the gospel. It tells us everything about the gospel of John. It shows us everything about Jesus. It demonstrates everything about life and death. It portrays everything about discipleship. In fact there's only one question that really matters that it doesn't answer for us. It gives us a suggested answer in the mouth of Martha but the one thing it can't do is answer the question for us. It gives us the gospel, it offers us Jesus, it holds out to us resurrection life and it describes what it means to respond. It leaves us with one remaining question: "Do you believe this?"