

John 11:1-44

Ash Wednesday's discussion of the good shepherd and the sheep who recognized his voice was a preparation for the story of the raising of Lazarus in today's gospel. Lazarus becomes the listening sheep who will recognize the voice of his good shepherd and go through the door of his tomb to life.

The Book of Signs, which, you may recall, makes up chapters two to eleven in John's Gospel, and is now drawing to a close. In the Fourth gospel, there are seven separate episodes, seven signs, seven pointers to a meaning that the sign itself could never capture. These are not miracle stories but narratives which lead to a new perspective, a new consciousness. They are not literal accounts of how a supernatural deity has invaded human history in order to change it miraculously. A sign is there to permeate reality and interpret it.

Interwoven through these signs is a series of Johannine characters, some of whom, like the man born blind, we have already met. We now come to the final and most complex of these Johannine characters. His name is Lazarus. More than any other figure in the Fourth gospel, Lazarus screams out the message that to read this book as if it were an account of the literal history is to misunderstand it completely.

In the Lazarus story, every symbol employed by John reveals that Lazarus is not a person, but a sign and a symbol. Lazarus has not been mentioned in any pre-Johannine Christian source. A man this crucially important to the Jesus story, would, if he were a real person, have made an impression on someone else in the sixty-five

to seventy years of Christian history before the gospel of John was written.

When Lazarus is finally introduced in this very late gospel, he is identified as the brother of Martha and Mary who live in Bethany, about two miles from Jerusalem. Martha and Mary were well known in earlier traditions, as reflected in Luke's Gospel. There is no suggestion in Luke that these two sisters, who were apparently quite close to Jesus, even had a brother.

There is also a deliberate quality about the way John develops his storyline. John tells us with great emphasis that Jesus, when first notified of Lazarus' sickness, refused to move until Lazarus was not only dead, but actually buried. By the time Jesus did arrive in Bethany, Lazarus had already been in his grave for four days and both Martha and Mary rebuked him for his tardiness.

The detail that Lazarus had been dead four days by the time Jesus got there is meant to underscore that he was beyond resurrection. The rabbis believed that the soul hovered over the body for three days and after that, there was no hope of resurrection. Maybe that is why Jesus had to rise on the third day.

We can understand the anguished cries of Martha and Mary, who greet Jesus separately but with the same words: "Sir, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." Implied in this statement are some pointed questions, perhaps even accusations. Where were you, Jesus? Why did you take so long getting here? I thought you loved my brother.

I thought you cared about us. Some of the neighbours who gathered also ask among themselves, “This fellow healed a blind man — why couldn’t he keep Lazarus from dying?”

Aren’t these exactly the kinds of questions we ask, or would like to ask, when tragedy strikes? Where were you, Lord? How could you have let this happen? Couldn’t you have prevented all this horrible pain and heartache?

But Jesus does not rebuke Martha or Mary or their friends for what they say. To Martha, he responds with a promise: “Your brother will come back to life again.” Jesus does not answer all the questions that were on everyone’s mind. He doesn’t explain to Mary and Martha and all those grieving why he didn’t come sooner and prevent Lazarus from dying. But it is clear that he is completely with them in their pain and loss, deeply moved and grieved.

Of course, Jesus does more than share in the pain and sorrow of his friends. He also acts. As Martha leads Jesus to the tomb, she informs Jesus: “By now the smell will be terrible, for he has been dead four days.” The language used in older translations is a bit stronger here: “But Lord, he stinketh!” Even though Martha had boldly professed to Jesus when he arrived, “And even now it’s not too late, for I know that God will bring my brother back to life again, if you will only ask him to,” she is no longer confident that Jesus knows what he is doing. Does Jesus really understand about death? There is no doubt about the certainty of Lazarus’ death. This is going to be a powerful and dramatic sign acted out on a very public stage.

The narrative is stretched out in a painfully long preamble. Jesus' emotions are portrayed. "Jesus wept." His love for Lazarus and his sisters is told again and again. There is a long discussion between Jesus and Martha on the meaning of resurrection. The realities of the "general resurrection at the last day" are described, and these are contrasted with the raising of Lazarus that is about to occur. The public processional from their home to the place of Lazarus' grave is told in far more detail than necessary. Jesus has the time once more to utter another "I AM" claim: "I am the resurrection and the life," adding that "he [or she] who believes in me, though he [or she] dies, yet shall he [or she] live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." Jesus then asks Martha whether she believes this. She responds with a three-part affirmation: You are the Christ, the son of God and the "one who is coming into the world." Jesus pulls the hope of the future resurrection into the present, promising abundant, eternal life that begins here and now.

Only then do we arrive at the dramatic climax of this narrative. Jesus walks toward the tomb of Lazarus and stops in front of it. The crowd behind him is silent. Jesus is undaunted by the stench of death. The great stone is removed. After repeating his promise that this would all lead to the glory of God, Jesus prays out loud for the benefit of the crowd.

Death is being challenged directly. With a loud voice the person who has claimed to be one with the source of life calls to the deceased man locked inside the boundary of mortality: "Lazarus, come out." Lazarus obeys this command. He comes out, but not easily. He is still wrapped in the burial clothes. His hands are tied to his

body and his legs are bound together. His face is wrapped with a burial cloth. As a literal event, this would be a strange sight - a mummy emerging from the tomb, walking in the baby steps required of one whose legs are tied together, without having arms free to use for balance. No faith healer has ever done that. Jesus concludes this episode by giving an order: "Unbind him, and let him go."

This poignant scene recalls earlier statements of Jesus: the promise that "the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out;" and that the shepherd "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" as we heard on Ash Wednesday.

Imagine the crowd of friends and enemies, the gasps and wonder that would have marked such an event, if it had really happened in the life of the Jesus of history. Can anyone's mind stretch far enough to believe that no mention of this event would have found its way into any written material for three or four generations after its occurrence, until John tells the story near the turn of the first century? No, this is not and was not history.

As much as this sign, the raising of Lazarus is about Jesus, it's also about us. Because we are all Lazarus. We are all dead and lifeless. We are all wrapped up corpses, bound in the grave clothes which the world lays on us. We are stiff and we have all begun to smell a little rank. We stinketh. Until – until! – Jesus calls us out of the tomb. Until he orders everything that binds us and holds us down, to be stripped off of us and tossed aside. Until he breathes his holy breath into us again

and makes us a new creation.

We are all Lazarus – the Body of Christ, the community of the baptized, and the Communion of Saints. We stinketh, until Jesus calls us out, frees us, and gives us life. And this is what binds us together, the biologically alive church and the biologically dead church: we have all been called out of the tomb and unwrapped. As Jesus stands at the edge of our tomb, shouting: “Come out!” We are to substitute our own name for that of Lazarus, hear his command, and walk into the light of day, pulling free of our grave clothes as we go.

Although Jesus seemed slow in coming and appearing too late, with Jesus, we discover that, it is never too late. Even when we are convinced that all is lost, even when we are ready to concede to the power of death, Jesus demonstrates that there is no loss, no tragedy, no power in heaven or on earth or under the earth, that can place us beyond the reach of his infinite love and abundant life.

In this sense, the raising of Lazarus isn't just something that Jesus accomplished thousands of years ago in a land far, far away. It's the work of Jesus today. Jesus still calls us out, because we still need it. We still stinketh. And some days we stinketh more than others. But the promise of the story of Lazarus is that, like Lazarus, Jesus loves us. He weeps for us. He is deeply moved by us. And he brings life to our death, freedom to our bondage, and a shining light to our every darkness.

The good shepherd lays down his life in order to take it up again. The

resurrection of Lazarus prefigures that of Jesus. The tomb won't be able to hold Jesus any more than it could hold Lazarus once Jesus showed up.

In Lazarus, we see the symbol of Jesus's greatest earthly demonstration of his power. We see Martha recognize Jesus as the "Messiah." We see many come to believe in Jesus. We see Jesus offer life, and ultimately, we will see those in power respond with death.

Following Jesus can lead us into dark places – uncomfortable, dirty, smelly places. It can lead us into danger, and bring us into contact with dangerous people. Following Jesus calls us to our pews and our hymns and our rituals, but it also demands that we go out into the world. Jesus calls us to love. And love can be difficult sometimes.

Following Jesus means that we have to love, and its okay if that scares you a little. It should. It means that you're paying attention. It means that you have your eyes wide open to the cost of discipleship.

Church, Come out! Come out of your comfort zone. Come out of your fortress. Come out of your "good old days." Come out of your sin. Come out of the lies that tell us how to succeed, consume, spend, buy, then donate and be happy. Come out of your slumber, and go into the Kingdom. Come out of your slumber, and go into your mission. Come out of your slumber, and go and make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

On Ash Wednesday we heard Jesus point out that his sheep will hear his voice and that they will pass through the gate to life. This moment is a living parable of the truth. He shouts in a loud voice to his beloved friend and calls him out of the tomb. And the “dead man” obliges. He has no choice. Jesus has absolute authority, and Lazarus is one of his obedient sheep.

But after all, aren't we all Lazarus? Are there not parts in each one of us that are dead, caught up in a culture of death? All that is dead in us, more or less hidden in our unconscious self, in the shadow areas or the “tomb” of our being, provokes a kind of death around us. We judge and condemn and push people down, wanting to show that we are better than they. We refuse to listen to those who are different and so we hurt them. All these destructive acts have their origin in all that is dead within us, all that creates a stench in the hidden parts of our being, which we do not want to look at or admit.

Jesus wants us to rise up and to become fully alive. He calls us out of the tomb we carry within us, just as God called Ezekiel to raise up from the dead all those people of Israel who were lying in the tomb of despair: Thus says the Lord God, “I am going to open your tombs and raise you up from your tombs, O my people ... I will put my spirit in you and you shall live.” This is what Jesus wants for each one of us today. To each of us he says: “Take away the stone!”

Maybe we like Martha, cry out, “No, it is too dirty, it smells too bad!” At his command maybe the stone is removed and Jesus can call us by name and cry out:

“Come out!”

We can then rise up, a bit more whole and holy, with the Spirit of Jesus in us. We are being put together again. We can let the light of Jesus penetrate all the darkness within us. As we find greater unity inside us, we bring greater unity around us. The story of Lazarus is the story of each one of us. It is the revelation that Jesus came to call us to rise up and to become fully alive in order to give life.

The resurrection is a process that begins every morning, every night, every day: We are called on a journey of resurrection to do the work of God, to bring love into our families, our churches, our communities, and the world.

Amen.