

The Raising of Lazarus – A Sermon for 5 Lent
March 9, 2008 **Susan Flanders**
John 11:1-45

This morning's long gospel – the long, long story of the raising of Lazarus – is unbelievable in terms of the laws of nature or the record of history. This morning's gospel – as a story of God's power in the face of death – is true, and it is no accident that John presents it as the last of Jesus' signs or miracles before Jesus himself becomes God's great Easter miracle.

When have you faced a death? When have you despaired over a loss or an ending? When has hope died for you? People have come to me over the years bringing their stories of death – because of illness or old age, because of divorce, because of infertility, or a child gone wrong, like a prodigal, stories of financial or professional disaster – and they want healing, and hope, and they want life back. Like Martha and Mary, coming to Jesus, we turn in desperation for help. And, like those in the story, including Jesus, our responses to the kinds of dying that are part of life, are various.

We deny what we can't face: "This illness does not lead to death," Lazarus is not dead, but sleeping. The marriage isn't really broken; the betrayal was unintended; the prodigal really isn't alcoholic or into drugs. In denial, we cling to the status quo – even if we're miserable – we hang on to what is familiar, the tortured comfort of not letting ourselves know what we really do know.

Or, in our despair, we seek someone or something to blame. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" – this from both Martha and Mary. Our "if onlys" well up in waves of regret and recrimination. We look back, longing that somehow things could have been different. As one who has been a part of two failed marriages, I've walked that road of blame and the road of denial a thousand times!

Along with denial and blame, we cast about, when we are facing death in its many forms, for a silver lining – some hint that things can somehow work out: the chemo will buy time, and meanwhile a new cure may emerge. We look for a fix: the bankruptcy bailout, the counseling that will change everything. We bargain for hope: "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." And Martha, after placing blame, offers her hope: "Even now, I know that God will give you whatever you ask." It is lines like these that encourage us to just pray hard enough and things will all be well. We reach for faith – suddenly needing it in ways we never have – promising "yes Lord, I believe." We struggle to turn things over to Jesus, even if we scarcely know what that means – turning things over to Jesus – does that mean we are to do nothing?

All of these responses to the deaths that are part of our lives are in this gospel story. Even Jesus seems, initially, to share in some denial, putting off coming right away to the side of his friend Lazarus. And when he finally does come to Bethany, maybe even Jesus feels remorse as he realizes the reality of Lazarus' death cannot be denied. Maybe the sisters were right; had he come earlier, could he have made a difference?

From across the centuries, we have Jesus and Lazarus' sisters and the people around them behaving in ways we can perhaps all recognize, even today. When faced with death, whether the end of life or one of life's many endings, we stand at the edge of the abyss, hanging on, as best we can, to our fragile hopes for life to be restored, to go on.

What happens in this gospel story, are tears. Mary races to meet Jesus – she is weeping, and so are the friends who go with her. The story says that when Jesus saw that, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved, and he himself began to weep. Finally, he comes directly to the tomb – the cave with its stench of death, the body wrapped in its grave cloths. And there, Jesus calls on the power of God to do what only God can do, and Lazarus comes out – no longer dead.

The only way I can understand this is as a story of God’s love meeting our despair. It was love, expressed in the anguished tears of Jesus, that raised Lazarus. My friend Alan Jones, in his book *Soul Making*, has a wonderful chapter called “The Gift of Tears.” He says, “Tears are agents of resurrection and transformation; they can raise the dead.” He is talking about something much deeper than “having a good cry,” as cleansing as that can sometimes be. Jones is speaking of tears as “much more radical, threatening and life-bearing...the tears of truth and insight breaking in and flooding the soul with new life.”

Jesus’ love for Lazarus was shown in his tears. They were his gift. This kind of love is not easy. It doesn’t hide in denial, or hold out silly promises. This is love in anguish. When people die, or their marriages do, or their children drift, or their life-style crumbles, it is love – being loved and being able to love, that we lose, or fear losing. We need love to bring us alive, beyond love, we are in darkness; we are in death.

I believe it is actually the love of God poured out into our blackest darkness that brings us alive; the gospel story suggests to me that that’s what happened between Jesus and Lazarus. God’s love in the face of our dying may come in all sorts of ways - through other people who love us and stand by. It may come from professional helpers – hospice nurses, marriage counselors, coaches and teachers, even lawyers. We may experience an inner awakening to new life, mysterious and unexpected, but still real. For many of us, these experiences live in the secret places of our hearts, in countless stories that have never been told – all of them, in some way, like the raising of Lazarus.

This story, and the story of good Friday are stories of God’s love here with us in Jesus, at the cave of dead Lazarus, God’s love on the cross – a love that suffers in all the ways that we do, but doesn’t die. God’s love that comes with full power into our deathly places as Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes in one of his poems. In another, he continues in this vein, saying, “But you are the God who opens all shut-downs; by your power you give futures.”

The pool of tears, wading right into the pains of what we face, living and grieving our losses honestly, is hard spiritual work. But in that pool, if we reach out, look around, are kindred souls. Probably all of us have been to the pool of tears, perhaps felt ourselves drowning there – we know what it is like.

What the story of Lazarus reminds us, as we move toward Easter, is that God is there too, even at the heart of despair, in the tears that open us and wash us and make us new, in the love that brings new life – beyond anything we can ask or imagine – until it happens. Amen.