

Into God's Future

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RCL, A

O God, whose beauty is beyond our imagining
And whose power we cannot comprehend:
Show us your glory as far as we can grasp it,
And shield us from knowing more than we can bear.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel story of Jesus bringing Lazarus back into life is not only long, it is also complex. So let's revisit it, consider it in four scenes, and see what secrets it might reveal.

Scene One

Jesus receives word that Lazarus, his friend whom he loves, was ill at his home in Bethany. The message had come from Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, who Jesus also loved, and in whose home he had been welcomed many times. Jesus' reaction to the news of the illness of his friend, his reaction to the sisters' cry for help—their emergency “Come Quickly!” appeal, their urgent 911 call—Jesus' reaction was to do nothing. He stayed where he was for two days, at least. Didn't mention it to the Disciples; didn't make preparation to go; didn't send a message back to say, “We're on our way.” He just stayed put and did nothing. And Mary and Martha watched their brother die!

What do you suppose was going on? This is not how a friend responds to a friend's need. Nor is this characteristic of Jesus who would immediately respond to the needs of strangers. Why was he now so remote and aloof from his friends, from those he loved? We will, I suggest, if we are patient, get a partial explanation. But not until near the end of the story. For now, we have to wonder, “What on Earth was Jesus thinking?” This much we know. God does not play games with us. And Jesus wasn't playing a game with his friends. But God's ways are not our ways. God's timing is not our timing. There is a great deal we don't understand. And our hopes and plans get thwarted. God often surprises us, and overturns our expectations. And we have to live with the frustration. Jesus didn't go when the sisters called him. But then, eventually, after doing nothing for days, he did go, with the mysterious prediction that “God will be glorified through what is to come.”

And we move on to Scene Two

Somehow Martha heard that Jesus was finally on his way and went to meet him. The first words out of her mouth were to scold and accuse him: “Master! If you'd been here, my brother would not have died!” Why didn't you come sooner? Why did you, of all people, allow this awful thing to run its course? Forget the small talk. Good old Martha goes right to final jeopardy! If only you'd been here. If only? How many times have you heard or said that? If only I'd taken a different route. If only he hadn't been in such a rush. If only I had been more sensitive. If only he hadn't smoked all those cigarettes all those years. If only she had taken my advice. If only there had been a tsunami warning system in place in the Indian Ocean.

We know the litany. Whatever it is, we know the sickening sense of wanting to turn back the clock so that everything in the present and the future can be different. It's a sort of nostalgia for the present that could have been if only the past had been a bit different. A bittersweet fantasy, caressing the moment that might have been but isn't. Martha knows, so she says Jesus would have, could have, cured her brother. If only?

Jesus' response to Martha's scold is peculiar, and their conversation becomes weird. They don't talk with each other, but at each other, past each other, even. What Martha says doesn't seem to register with Jesus, and what Jesus says doesn't seem to register with Martha. Both seem preoccupied with their

own thoughts. Martha talks about the past. If only? Jesus talks about the future, “Your brother will rise again.” This was nothing Martha had not heard before. It was common, standard Jewish teaching for the time. Martha knows it and says so. But her answer seems flat, as if to say: “That’s nice, but what about now, with Lazarus dead and buried. What comfort is there for me and for Mary in that?” And she isn’t prepared for what Jesus says next. Although you and I treasure his next words as among the most precious he ever spoke, “I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live even if they die.” With Jesus, the future becomes part of the present. And it isn’t a fact. It’s a person. It’s Jesus standing in front of Martha, challenging her to make the huge jump of hope and trust. “Do you believe this?” he asks. Her answer is just as flat as before: “Of course,” she said, “You are the son of God, you are the messiah. Blah, blah, blah. But so, how does that comfort us now?” Why doesn’t Martha get it? Why don’t we get it? ? We who are sometimes a lot like Martha. We can’t wait, we have to get it off our chest, we have to tell Jesus what we think of him and his strange ways. Why don’t we get it—that Jesus is coming and has already come into our present, into our pain and sorrow and death, into our mess and grief, and stands before us as he stood before Martha, with good news, hope and new possibilities. But often we don’t get it, and neither does Martha. Jesus says nothing further. And Martha goes off to get her sister. And Scene Two abruptly comes to an end.

Scene Three

Jesus finally arrives in Bethany and there faces the sisters and their friends in their terrible grief. And there is now no time for the brave and hopeful words he had spoken to Martha before. Mary accuses/scolds Jesus just as her sister had done, “If only you’d been here, Master, my brother would not have died!” And Jesus, says the Gospel writer, Jesus was deeply moved and very troubled and then that bluntest, most emotional verse. Jesus wept!

I suspect that if we could understand all that lay behind those tears, we would understand much about Jesus, more maybe than it is well for us to understand, more maybe than we could handle. But we can understand something. What staggered Jesus there in Bethany, what was tearing his heart to pieces, wasn’t death as the prophets described it: The shroud drawn over the face of all the peoples, or the covering spread over all nations (*Isaiah 25*), not a distant universal condition of darkness that we all take for granted and will eventually envelope us all and that Jesus could see through. No. It was this particular death, this specific present darkness which he saw on the swollen faces of his friends who wept before him.

Here I am reminded of a scene from the movie, “Four Weddings and a Funeral.” Among the characters is a gay couple, Matthew and Gareth. At one of the wedding receptions, Gareth dies, literally drops dead of an apparent heart attack. At his funeral, Matthew, Gareth’s spouse and life partner, in order to express his grief, reads a poem by W. H. Auden, which concludes with these lines:

He was my North, my South, my East and West.
My working week and my Sunday rest.
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song.
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now; put out every one.
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

It’s Matthew’s grief through Auden’s poetry that helps us understand what Mary and Martha must have been feeling and what shattered Jesus’ spirit to the point of tears, a death and a darkness he had no heart or desire to see beyond. But maybe it was also something else. One of the bystanders witnessing this emotional scene in Bethany was heard to remark, “He (Jesus) opened the eyes of a blind man, didn’t he? Couldn’t he have done something to keep this man, Lazarus, from dying?” And you can’t help believe that in the very depth of Jesus’ being, he was asking himself the same, dark question. So perhaps Jesus’ tears were not only for Lazarus’ death and the grief it was causing his sisters, but also for a death and a grief still to come—his own. So there in Bethany, Jesus wept for himself, as well as for Lazarus. And we cannot help but connect the two, the fate of Lazarus and the fate of Jesus. And perhaps now we can begin to understand, at least a little, why it was that Jesus didn’t go when called, why he stayed away

from Bethany when the sisters begged him to come. He was, perhaps, wrestling with God's will and his own future. Consider this: In John's Gospel account of the passion, there is no dramatic picture of Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane, agonizing over God's will for his life, begging, pleading for strength to endure what must be coming, sweating great drops of blood, so intense was his anguish and struggle to find his way into God's future. No. John portrays Jesus' agony in a different way. Earlier the disciples had been quite right to caution about going to Bethany. "The Judeans," they said, "will kill you if you go." Bethany was less than two miles or so from Jerusalem, too close to the holy city for the sake of safety, and who knows what would happen then. We'll never know if this is why he hesitated to go to Bethany and the grieving sisters. But maybe it did have something to do with it. And later, Jesus audibly prays before the tomb of Lazarus, "Thank you, Father, for hearing me." He doesn't pray that God will give him the power to bring Lazarus back. It is rather to acknowledge that God has already heard him, which perhaps suggests that whatever he was praying for before he came to Bethany has been answered and now he sees the way clear before him.

And so onto Scene Four

At the tomb itself Jesus commands, "Remove the stone." Then with a loud shout he commands, "Lazarus, come out!" And his old friend comes out still bound and tied up in his burial cloths. And Jesus makes one final command, "Untie him, and let him go!" And that's it. That's it. I, for one, would like more. Where is the cheering crowd, praising God? Where are the sisters? And why aren't they running to embrace their brother? But then, they never asked for this. And maybe it was just too much! Did he come back as a new, living, whole human being, cured of the illness which killed him? Or did he come back into the light of day as a living corpse, decomposing, and with the stench and stink of death still upon him as Martha and Mary had predicted? We don't know. We aren't told. And it's the silence, the unknowing that is so deafening at the end of the story, suggesting, perhaps, that in the end, it isn't about Lazarus at all, but about Jesus. Because if death was to be truly defeated, truly and finally defeated for Lazarus, truly and finally defeated for us and those we love, it would be only by dying himself that Jesus could defeat it. At least, I suspect, that is what Jesus came to realize: that out of his ordeal with Lazarus came the certainty: If he is to reach and touch lives and hearts, it would only be by his own suffering and death that he could. It was becoming painfully clear that to heal the sick and restore sight to the blind and bring back to life those who had died, to preach good news to the poor and liberty to the captives, to wear himself out with his endless teaching and traveling the whole length and breadth of the land—well, clearly, it hadn't worked and it wasn't enough. And maybe he wondered in his darkest moments, if maybe God, even God, had failed and was defeated. There had to be more.

So eventually, Jesus goes to Jerusalem where he seems to know that the journey will end, and from where he seems to know he will never return. It's a cruel irony—many believed in Jesus because of Lazarus we are told. But others couldn't wait to go to Jerusalem and tell the religious authorities. And Jesus' death, unlike the death of his friend Lazarus, would be deliberate, conceived in hate and carried out in violence. Jesus will be put to death because he brought Lazarus back to life. Jesus pulled Lazarus out of death and back into life. He reversed the process of death for his dear old friend. But it will not be the same for Jesus. God does not do for Jesus, his true beloved son and only son, what Jesus did for Lazarus. Instead, God pulls Jesus all the way through death and out the other side into a new sort of life, so that Jesus returns to us again and again until the end of time and beyond, offering us the chance to participate with him in the new life of love, of joy, of light and resurrection glory.

Jesus was right: In the end, it all gives glory to God. "See how much he loved Lazarus," said the crowd that strange day in Bethany. And what you and I need to do is turn that around and say, "See how much Jesus loves us." But know this: as soon as we do that, the love we must then return to him is not going to be without sacrifice or pain or suffering. Because we too must die. Die to sin. Die to shame, to prejudice, opinions, stagnant ideas. Die to old ways of living and old ways of thinking. It means we must practice seeing ourselves being brought forth from whatever tomb we get ourselves holed up in, because we are called to witness, to make known, to reveal in ourselves and in our church, Christ and his new eternal life that is not dependent or contingent upon earthly life and death. "I have been crucified with Christ," joyfully proclaims the Holy Apostle Paul. "I have been crucified with Christ, and now it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (*Galatians 2:20*) So it is, and so it must always be for us!