

Trinity Episcopal Cathedral  
Little Rock, AR  
26 March 2023  
John 11:1-45

Good morning. My name is Rob. I'm a priest and a chaplain at the Episcopal Collegiate School school. I consider myself a friend of the Cathedral. I count a number of folks in this community as my friends, most especially my wonderful colleagues Lisa and Amy. It's an honor to have been invited to preach this morning. I pray that Christ would make me worthy of this invitation.

This morning's gospel is, well, let me put it this way: Maybe I ought to have checked the gospel reading before I accepted Amy's invitation to preach. The raising of Lazarus is one of the most uniquely complex passages in the gospels. It is regarded as one of the seven signs of Jesus in the gospel of John, seven encounters with Jesus in which something miraculous takes place. The changing of the water to wine. The healing of the royal official's son at Capernaum. The healing of the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda. The feeding of the multitudes and walking on water. The healing of the Blind Man, which we heard last week. And now, the raising of Lazarus. Seven signs.

Signs can be peculiar and even problematic. What do they point to? What do they mean? The Raising of Lazarus is a long and dramatic narrative. It has a theatrical quality to it--a stage play in five acts. The actual raising of Jesus's dead friend Lazarus takes only a few verses toward the end of the passage. That moment is preceded by a series of scenes each set in closer proximity to Lazarus's tomb, and creating a complicated lens through which we might view this sign.

First a message arrives from Lazarus's sisters Mary and Martha: "Lazarus, your friend, whom you love is sick." We get a rare monologue of Jesus: "This illness does not lead to death but it is for God's glory." Jesus quietly decides to wait two days before saying anything. Then Jesus has an odd conversation with his disciples about returning to Judea. Why would you go back there, they ask. They are trying to kill you. Jesus dismisses their concerns with a somewhat cryptic comment about daylight and darkness before telling them why he wants to return to Judea, "Lazarus has fallen asleep." It's a bit too vague for his disciples. They reply, "Oh, he'll feel better after a nap!" Until Jesus tells them plainly that Lazarus has died. And to totally exemplify their confusion Thomas blurts out, "Well, let's all go then, that we may die with him." I don't even think Thomas understands what he's saying--I'll leave that to another sermon, though.

When Jesus arrives at the home of Martha and Mary, we learn that Lazarus may have died even before Jesus received the message--four days he's been dead. Martha runs out to meet Jesus some distance from the home. Their discourse is both a profoundly human and theological exchange. Lord, if only you had been here, she says. Martha goes and tells her sister Mary that Jesus had arrived. Mary comes out to meet Jesus accompanied by a crowd who have gathered, perhaps to mourn, perhaps to see the spectacle. Mary echoes her sister's agonizing words, "Lord...If only you had been here..." before they head to the tomb. A strange drama full of complicated scenes, dialogue, entrances, and exits--even before Lazarus is raised. Or, if you prefer, a passionate symphony, each movement intensifying as Jesus draws nearer to Lazarus's tomb.

Signs are funny things. Throughout the gospels, Jesus is often reticent to offer a sign. Jesus heals someone and then commands that they keep quiet about it. Many times, the curious and the suspicious alike ask Jesus for a sign--demand a sign from him--show us a sign from heaven! He never quite obliges them.

I think it's fair to say that often we want a sign--something to give us insight, to point us where to go, to tell us what we should do. But we also know that signs of the sort we're talking about today, don't quite work that way. We sometimes fixate on the show rather than the purpose and meaning. We can see evidence of this among the seven signs of John's gospel, where the sign and what they signify get mixed up. Jesus is reduced to a wonderworking nice guy; to someone who, at the party, can not only turn water into wine, but into good wine. He can walk on the water, then turn it into wine! He's the guy who can heal with a word like he did the royal official's son at Capernaum--couldn't he have done that for Lazarus when he first received the message that Lazarus was sick? Jesus feeds the multitudes and then he flees the scene. Why? Because he realized that the crowds were going to try and make him a king--and who wouldn't want a king who can give you bread any time you are hungry. Signs are tricky business.

At the tomb we arrive at an unavoidable moment--perhaps the culmination of all of these exchanges. The tension has been building with each scene. Having finally arrived at the tomb, Jesus begins to weep. He wept; Jesus wept: a sign within the sign perhaps. In some ways it's not hard to imagine. But there is no other moment in any of the gospels quite like this. There were others there weeping--Mary and the crowd that had gathered. But for us and for Christians for nearly two thousand years... What does it mean that Jesus wept?

Some in the crowd say, "See how much he loved his friend." Undoubtedly Jesus did love his friend, Lazarus. The English says that Jesus was "greatly disturbed". The Greek here implies that Jesus wasn't just upset; he was aggravated, angry, even indignant. Jesus's tears are about more than just sentimental feelings. They are a sign of a deeper agony--one that prefigures his later agony in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest and betrayal. It is Jesus's agony over us. The anguish he feels at our struggle with... everything: the frustration and futility of life that consume us. That our world and our lives are not what they ought to be. We know this. We can find evidence in the headlines or open up social media. We can see it standing on the street corners as we drive home. We can examine our own consciences. And we can see and know at every turn that things are just not how they ought to be--that we ourselves are not always who and what we ought to be, to our seemingly never ending frustration. No matter our efforts or intentions. And who or what could deliver us.

Jesus has seen this reality of our futility at every point along the way since the message first arrived from Lazarus's sisters: In the confusion of Thomas and the other disciples; in the sorrow and grief of Martha and in Mary; in this crowd of people, bless their hearts, that have come to needlessly insert themselves into the situation. Jesus--sad, upset, angry--weeps that our lives and our world so often come to suffering and grief. And like Martha and Mary we are left say, "If only, if only, if only...."

Jesus weeps knowing that it will take more than a mere sign to convince Martha and Mary and the disciples, and this crowd of people at the tomb--and all of us what is the truth, the way, and the life. At this gut-wrenching moment Jesus, in spite of protests, confronts even the grim and ghastly realities of death and Lazarus' decomposing body... Jesus calls Lazarus to come out, a sign of God's glory even at the grave.

It isn't merely the signs that Jesus performs, outward and visible, but what they signify, something inward, powerful and transformative. There is only one way to interpret this and the previous six signs--they all point to the 8th sign. To put it plainly it is not the signs, but Jesus and his saving work.

Earlier Martha confronts Jesus with earnest human grief--If only you had been here, Lord. Lazarus would not have died. If only, Lord. If only. To which Jesus responds, "I am the resurrection and the life." Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Our Lord and Savior. The Word Made Flesh. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Jesus himself. Not a sign or a facsimile. Not a trick or a show he performs but his true and saving work borne from the unfathomable depths of God's love not just for his creation, not just for humanity, but for you, to deliver you from sin and suffering and death; to redeem and transform you from the degradation and condemnation of the world; to undo forever the very futility and frustration over which Jesus weeps--that by his cross and resurrection, in Christ, even if we die, we shall live; and living and believing in him, we shall never die.