

The gospel about Lazarus that we just heard is far too short. John's narrative starts several verses earlier and is important because the raising of Lazarus cannot, I think, be separated from the teaching about the resurrection and life which precedes it.

But there is another perhaps more significant problem. Why was Jesus greatly disturbed in spirit?

Jesus was in another place when Lazarus became sick. Bethany is very near Jerusalem, and, apparently, when Lazarus took ill, Jesus wasn't close by. Is that why Jesus is sad when he gets there too late? Not quite. Because here's what John tells us happened when Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters, send word to Jesus that Lazarus was sick.

When Jesus heard it, he said, "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." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. (John 11:4-6)

That's the real problem in this story. Jesus *delayed on purpose!* He healed many, many people throughout his ministry, most of them perfect strangers. So when he gets word that one of his best friends is gravely ill, does he come running to heal him? No! Instead, he *delays* a couple of extra days.

It only makes sense if Jesus already knows that this is not going to end in death. Yes Lazarus dies and is laid in the tomb but that isn't all. In the verses just before we pick it up this morning, Jesus tells Martha, "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?" (John 11:25-26) From the moment this story has begun, Jesus has known exactly what is going to happen. Lazarus is going to die. But, then again, he isn't. Believing in Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life, means, in effect, that we don't have to die. We

don't have to *fear* death because it is as easily brushed aside by a God of life as is being asleep.

Lazarus is a demonstration. A teaching brought to life. "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live." And just in case we didn't get it the first time he says again, "everyone who lives and believes in me will never die". God is a God of exuberant life and even though we die, we live. Death is not the end of life for those who are enrolled in the reign of God. In fact, there is strong Biblical evidence that, contrary to centuries of superstition, we all live in after death and there is no hell at all.

So why was Jesus greatly disturbed in spirit? It can't have been because Lazarus had died, because he knew that was going to happen. In fact, the translation is glossing over the emotional impact of the text – Jesus was angry. "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." Might more accurately be , "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was really angry and agitated."

It doesn't fit our picture of Jesus does it?

I can certainly sympathize with the translators who make him sad rather than angry. So if he was angry – why?

Those who were wailing over Lazarus' death did not understand that it wasn't the end. I doubt if Jesus was angry with them as individuals but rather at the culture which told them that death is the worst thing that can happen. That death is final. That everything ends with death. Because that simply isn't true.

Jesus is sad that his friend has died, and it is always appropriate for us to grieve our loss when a beloved dies. It would be inhuman not to do so. Animals grieve too. The bonds of affection and attachment are broken

by death, and part of our healing is to grieve. But we need not grieve for the one who has died. They live on.

And that is what we celebrate this morning in our bitter sweet remembering of the communion of saints. Even as we feel our own loss with sadness, we celebrate the new life of those who have gone before us and the connection we still have with them in the mystical body of Christ, the mystical communion of saints which keeps us connected with one another in Christ in a deep and real though unseen way.

Those who have died are made part of the new Creation, part of the new heaven and earth which John saw in his vision on Patmos. In their baptism, they, like us, have already died and risen in Christ. Their physical death allows them to continue to live the life given to us by the God in whom life never ends but in a new Creation, a new heaven and earth where God dwells more directly with God's people. We don't know what that might be like. We can imagine. But what we do know and can hold on to with certainty is what Jesus said, "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."

Jesus was angry because the mourners were treating Lazarus' death as the end of everything – they were part of a culture focused on death. How then would he respond to our culture today?

How would he respond to a culture where innocent people are gunned down in a moment of overwhelming hatred? Where hatred is fomented by our president? Where fear of the other is being nurtured and cultivated for political ends? Where our God is being cited as a reason for exclusion and even for murder? I suspect that Jesus would be really angry and agitated... as well as sad.

As people of faith we are people with a capacity for living with contradiction – we know that our God is a God of exuberant life and unconditional, inclusive love and yet we live in a world that holds

exclusion to be important and death to be a suitable and total end to our enemies. We hold within ourselves the anger and agitation that Jesus felt, as well as the sadness and yet the joy of the resurrection.

Because resurrection happens. Lazarus was a demonstration that even though he had been dead long enough for his body to start to decay and his brain to be totally dead, yet he lived when called out by the Christ.

We have been called out by the Christ; we have been offered life in all the dead places within us – we have died and been raised with Christ and we know that our lives go on through the grave. Like the saints before us we believe Jesus when he says ““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.”

And we are the people of the New Creation. The new heaven and the new earth, but for Jesus, that new Creation, the reign of God, was to happen here and now not just in the future. And so let us use our anger and our agitation as fuel for our work to create the reign of God, a place where all are welcome, where there is no outsider and therefore no victim and no scapegoat.

Standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before, let us not hesitate, let us not be fearful as together we create the beloved community.

With thanks to Paul J. Nuechterlein for his excellent sermon “The God of Life”  
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