

## Dead men walking

John 11:1-44

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OK. Show of hands: How many are tired of long stories from the Gospel According to John? You wouldn't be alone. We've had one after another for this month of Sundays. And if, as somebody said last week, Jesus came across as a real jerk in the story of the man born blind (actually a more colorful word than jerk was used, but it's not something I can quote from the pulpit)—what are we to think of him today? He hears that a good friend is ill, and he dallies. And then he announces to his companions, "I'm glad I wasn't there when he died—for *your* sake, so *you* might believe."

Ouch. Who does this guy think he is?

This is a hard story and not just for the obvious reasons. There's the question of Jesus' personality. And there's the question of whether we're supposed to believe that this actually happened. And there's the not inconsiderable question, if it did happen, of whether it did any good, because we find out in the next chapter (no surprise) that the raising of Lazarus really ticked off the religious leaders because of the stir it has caused. So much so that they decide not only to get Jesus executed, but to kill Lazarus, too. Poor Lazarus: Dying of disease, only to be resurrected and then killed again. Murdered this time (we have to assume) because while he lives, he's walking talking proof of the mysterious power that Jesus can bring to bear. As they say of Death Row convicts on their way to the gallows, in this story and after it, Lazarus is a dead man walking. And from this point on in John's gospel, Jesus is too.

It gets worse before it gets better.

There are shadowy things here we haven't even glimpsed yet, and if you don't see them, you can't find your way through this thicket. Here's the first of three: Remember when Jesus says, "This illness of Lazarus's doesn't lead to death. Rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it?" It's not so straightforward. This illness *will* lead to death—twice for Lazarus and once for Jesus, and according to the way Jesus is portrayed in this gospel, he already knows that. (It's better to read John especially as story rather than as history.) But there's an even stranger aspect to this statement. In this gospel, glorification is a synonym for crucifixion. When Jesus says he will be glorified because of this illness of Lazarus's, what he means is he'll be crucified. So this "doesn't lead to death," but it *does* lead to two people dying (three times). And it will lead to glorification, meaning crucifixion. Everything means what it means in this story, and it also means something very different. Yes, John is one odd duck. At times you want to throw up your hands and ask, "What's the point in reading this guy? Why doesn't he just say what he means?" But sometimes truth is paradoxical. And John more than any other biblical writer lives in this world of mirrors.

I know this is horrifying, equating crucifixion with glorification. You might even wonder if Jesus has a death wish, saying that Lazarus's illness will give glory to God because it will lead to his own glorification-slash-crucifixion. But this is exactly the question: Does Jesus have a death wish? The answer is No. Exactly the opposite. But in a paradoxical way. This is a very odd passage indeed, and all the more compelling for its difficulty. That's why it's one of the most important stories in the gospels, and worth sticking with. As distasteful as this story sounds, it means what it sounds like and

then transcends that meaning to signify its very opposite. This is the path this gospel writer takes. And this is why this story endures.

The key is in Jesus saying he is the resurrection and the life.

Fasten your seatbelts. It's going to be a bumpy ride.

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We don't like an inscrutable Jesus. We want him to be understandable. We want him to be more like a friend. We want him to be nice. So in a way, this story holds up a mirror to us. By not giving us what we want, it prompts us at least to recognize what we're looking for and not finding.

You'd want Jesus to go immediately to see his ailing friend. More than that, we'd want him to go and heal him. The messenger that Mary and Martha send to Jesus doesn't ask him to come and cure their brother. The messenger simply says Lazarus is ill. If there's an expectation that Jesus might heal him, at this point it's our own. But Jesus delays for two days. When he arrives in Bethany, he finds out that Lazarus has been dead for four. Do the math. There's no way Jesus could have gotten there in time to heal him. True, Mary and Martha both say that if Jesus had been there, their brother would not have died. But they can't be blaming him for not coming quickly enough to save his life. Even without the delay, John seems to be telling us, Jesus simply didn't have time. The sisters are grieving. And they're making a very personal statement. Logic isn't the determiner here. Neither is blame. Maybe they're simply upset that this exceptional family friend of theirs isn't theirs alone. In their time of need, they want him for themselves. But he isn't theirs alone.

Then there's the part about Jesus weeping. At least he does *that*. If we were worried that he really didn't care about Lazarus, at least he weeps. He's sorry. He's compassionate.

Well, maybe not. It turns out that the translators may have injected a bit more sentimentality into the story than was called for.

Listen carefully:

<sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping, and the villagers who came with her also weeping, he was ~~greatly disturbed~~ in spirit and ~~deeply moved~~. <sup>34</sup>He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." <sup>35</sup>Jesus began to weep. <sup>36</sup>So the villagers said, "See how he loved him!" <sup>37</sup>But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" <sup>38</sup>Then Jesus, again ~~greatly disturbed~~, came to the tomb...

Remember when I said there were three shadowy things lurking in the linguistic thicket of this story, and the first was that when John says glorification he means crucifixion? Here are the other two. We're told that Mary was weeping, that the villagers were weeping, and that Jesus wept. Weeping, weeping, wept. The problem is that John didn't use the same word all three times. He says Mary wept, and the villagers wept. He uses a different word when he talks about what Jesus did.

Hold that thought.

Jesus sees them weeping, and he's "greatly disturbed," "deeply moved." So he's what, sad? grieving? sorry for their loss? That's what we might expect. That's what the translation seems to suggest. But from what I read, John's language doesn't say Jesus was sad. What it says is he was indignant. He was angry. He was agitated and troubled. And when it says he wept, what it actually suggests is more that he cries tears of bitterness and anger with the sisters and their neighbors than it does that he shares their sorrow.<sup>1</sup>

Why?

There's a line of biblical interpretation that comes from a Frenchman named René Girard. Girard is a very perceptive scholar, and he sees in the story of Jesus someone who turned the world upside down, particularly when it comes to the myth of redemptive violence—the idea that violence can be a helpful and healing thing. Even more: that violence can be godly. This as you may recall is a traditional way of understanding the crucifixion of Jesus: that God requires it, and it's redemptive because it pays for our sins. Girard rebels against that notion and is able to turn it on its head.

One of Girard's followers focuses on this question of the villagers' weeping versus Jesus' crying bitter tears. He links John's word for weeping with the practice of ritual mourning.<sup>2</sup> Maybe you know about this. It may seem strange or artificial within our culture, but in some parts of the world like the Middle East, then as now, there are people who go to places of grief and mourn publicly. It's not that they're insincere. It's that mourning is seen as a catharsis, a public good. It helps people get their emotions out. It helps them bring that energy to the surface and do something with it. Some suggest that this is what John is referring to when he says the villagers were weeping. Earlier he's told us that people came from nearby Jerusalem to Mary and Martha's home to console them. Very likely they've come to lead the mourning.

Mourning has an energy that needs release. I remember when my father died. I couldn't focus. I felt like I didn't have any energy. Many—maybe most—of us feel this way after a loved one has died. We're just worn out because it takes so much energy to deal with our loss. In our culture we turn that energy in on ourselves, and we get exhausted. There's a lot of anger in dealing with a death. And we turn it in on ourselves.

Except when we turn it on someone else. How else to explain mobs? How else to explain bloodletting in response to the death of 3000? Especially when we feel that death has been brought by a wrong, we turn our grief into the energy of retaliation. The Girardians retell the story of Slobodan Milosevic and his men parading the 600-year-old corpse of a Serbian general around the countryside in Kosovo in 1989. They were trying to whip up public hatred in support of their policy to ethnically cleanse that part of Serbia of Albanian Muslims. The corpse gave them a reminder of past wrongs. It gave them a place to focus the energy of their resentment, until they turned that focus onto others. It gave them an avenue for catharsis. And it led not just to violence, but to the strengthening of a culture of death. How else to explain Rwanda? or the recent violence in Kenya?

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<sup>1</sup> See Gail R. O'Day's commentary on the Gospel According to John in Volume IX of *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*.

<sup>2</sup> [http://girardianlectionary.net/year\\_a/lent5a.htm](http://girardianlectionary.net/year_a/lent5a.htm)

Ah, you might counter. But Lazarus wasn't murdered. (Not this time, anyway.) He died of an illness. Who would the people be angry at? Even if the professional mourners did bring all the energy of their grief to the surface, who might they attack in their frustration?

Think of the people in Gaza, unable to get medicines. Think of the Kurds in various countries around the world where they as a people are oppressed. (Iraq is the *best* place to be a Kurd in the Middle East these days.) Think of some poor family in the richest country in the world, unable to afford medicines or food. Think they don't have people to blame for a death caused not by murder but by illness? And now remember the social conditions of Jesus and his fellow Jews in Roman-occupied Judea. Think they wouldn't blame their oppressors for the violence of poverty?

Maybe this is why all the public grieving makes Jesus indignant, agitated, troubled. He can see where public grieving can lead, *did* lead in the various rebellions of the first century. This is why a nice Jesus doesn't fit in this story. A nice Jesus wouldn't be indignant. He'd do the same kind of weeping the others do. And John would have described him differently.

Even if the hired weepers aren't working the crowd into a frenzy that might lead to a thirst for revenge, they are mercenary specialists in the culture of death. But what Jesus points to is resurrection and life. Again, as always, he speaks of himself as a looking glass through which we might see God. This is the answer to the earlier question of who Jesus thinks he is. He is the light that has come into the eye of the world so that we might see God at work. And what he wants to show us is not death, but resurrection and life.

So this illness of Lazarus's does lead to deaths. Plural. But it doesn't lead ultimately to death, because death is not an ultimate end. The sisters say, "Yes, I know Lazarus will be resurrected in the final day." But that's not the point either. What Jesus tries to show them (unsuccessfully, I'd say) is resurrection in the here and now. Life in the here and now. Fullness of life. Eternal life, now. "I come that you might have life and have it abundantly," he's just said in the preceding chapter. I don't think it's just coincidence that this story so closely follows that statement. But as long as we remain resigned to a culture of death and revenge, focusing on and reacting to death more than to life, we're missing his message.

This story is not supposed to be nice. It's not supposed to make us feel comfortable. It's supposed to be a revelation.