

The heiress, Lady Nancy Astor,
 was bedridden during much of her final illness.
 At one point she woke briefly
 to find her family gathered all around her.
 Her last words on earth:
 “Am I dying, or is this my birthday?” . . . Well, yes.
 Lazarus emerging from the tomb
 might have said with equal poignancy,
 “Was I dead? Or is this my birthday?” . . . Well, yes.
 It may seem too early in Lent
 to shift the focus from Jesus
 to a family’s grief.
 We can easily relate to the bitterness and grief
 of a family experiencing the final illness
 of a loved one.
 But grief hangs like crepe
 over the entire Easter story.
 And it is through the Easter lens
 that we can best understand the raising of Lazarus.
 Most of us have been there, in the depths,
 screaming at God in anger – scolding God –
 over the untimely death of someone we loved.
 In today’s lesson, we are grateful to hear
 what God says to our angry screams of grief:
 I am Resurrection. I am Life.
 Those who believe in me, even though they die,
 will live, and everyone who lives
 and believes in me will never die.
 We recite these comforting words at funerals.
 Yet in context of the gospel narrative,
 they seem of little comfort to Mary or Martha.
 Jesus speaks these words right upon his arrival.
 He has yet to encounter the full force of their grief
 or the grief of the wider community.
 The full force of grief is yet to come.
 At this point, Jesus is little more than a presence –
 a tardy presence at that.
 For days, the sisters prayed Jesus would come
 and cure their brother Lazarus.

Now, he’s too late to be of any help to him.
 For Jesus, too, a decisive moment has arrived –
 the revealing of his humanity and divinity, all one.
 Jesus is about to experience,
 more vividly than ever before,
 both the pain of death and the power of life.
 With everyone around him consigned to death,
 Jesus commits to life.
 He had come to this realization
 three days before arrival in Bethany.
 He tells his disciples plainly, “Lazarus is dead.
 For your sake I am glad I was not there.”
 He can release the full force of resurrection
 to the family without futile attempts
 at healing Lazarus.
 Jesus has delayed his arrival in Bethany
 but not out of indifference.
 Jesus loves the household of Lazarus.
 Perhaps he has stayed with them
 on visits to Jerusalem nearby.
 No doubt he knows how fond
 the Bethany community is of Lazarus, too.
 Still, Jesus tarried until he felt sure
 Lazarus was dead.
 This put him at odds with his own disciples,
 as well as Lazarus’ sisters.
 By the time he finally arrives,
 the sisters are stricken with grief.
 Mary kneels at his feet and chastises Jesus:
 “Lord, if you had been here,
 my brother would not have died.”
 Jesus finds himself surrounded
 by a throng of mourners, wailing and weeping.
 Jesus is greatly disturbed in spirit, the text says.
 It is worth digging into the emotion behind
 the Greek words for “disturbed in spirit.”
 It’s a mixture of *awe and agony*,
 scorn and sympathy.
 Let me try an illustration:

Do you remember the National Geographic documentary about the Emperor penguins? To feed their hatchlings, the adult penguins have to march 100 miles to the sea. Fathers and mothers alternate making the trek leaving the chicks vulnerable for months at a time. It's the way God made them. The viewer is moved to both *awe and agony*. That's what Jesus feels as he surveys the grief and acknowledges the finality of the death of his dear friend, Lazarus. Disturbed in spirit. He asks, "Where have you laid him?" As he says this, his divine mind flashes forward to Mary Magdalene weeping outside his own tomb and asking "Where have you laid him?" Jesus is at this state of heightened emotion when the crowd of mourners answers, "Lord, come, see" and leads him to the cave. The convergence of past, present, and future overwhelming him, Jesus bursts into tears. At the cave, Jesus is again "greatly disturbed." His friend, Lazarus, lies inside, cold and bound. All the deaths since the beginning of creation converge in the heart of the Son of Man. In one single moment, he bears the pain of all the relationships broken by sudden death. . . including the relationships about to be broken through the looming threat of a cross. "Remove the stone." Staring into that cave, Jesus faces the reality of his own death as well as the full potential of resurrection. But the mourners only see Jesus, weeping. "Couldn't he who opened the eyes of the blind one have kept this one from dying?" Have you experienced God as tardy, or uncaring – far removed, indifferent to your needs and feelings? Have you screamed at God in anger – or scolded, "Shame on you, God.

Why have you not have kept this good person from dying?" According to the tapes we replay in times of grief, death isn't supposed to sting. We try to salve our grief with pious clichés: Death frees the soul from the torments of the body. They're in a better place now. God has called them home. But your inner reality is anger and doubt and resentment. Does God play favorites? Didn't God care about this person? Why would God take my loved one and leave me alone? Do I not matter to God? What have I done to offend God? A Christian might even conclude, falsely, that death is the one thing that God can't control. Grief and the anger that accompanies it follow any loss that matters – loss of income, loss of mobility, loss of companionship, loss of innocence, loss of confidence, loss of safety. We are grieving the loss of personal freedom during the Covid-19 crisis. And every loss in life is like a little death for us. Each loss is another band tightening around our zest for living. There's the band of guilt. The band of jealousy. The band of regret, or suspicion, or vindictiveness. In the end, it's the band of fear that controls: We don't love for fear of rejection, don't laugh for fear of embarrassment; don't dream for fear of disappointment; don't risk for fear of failure. But my Christian friends, the real failure in life is dying without really living. God is not aloof from human fear or regret. Quite the opposite:

God knows first-hand how grief hurts.

Outside the cave where Lazarus lies, Jesus' tears prove that he connects on the deepest level with human pain and sorrow.

The disturbances of Jesus' spirit – awe, agony – are fruits of a fully realized humanity. (That humanity lives on in the dance of the Trinity.)

The moment of truth brings Jesus to a realization that his mission is to lift up Life Itself – life in its pain and loss, as well as life in its profound joys.

Jesus realizes that all people who choose him as the well-spring of their life will participate in the glory of God, just as he does. As past, present, and future are fused in God, so for all who put their trust in God.

The stone is lifted up.

Jesus lifts his eyes up to heaven.

Quietly, he prays,

“Father I am grateful that you heard me.”

Suddenly, as if releasing the breath of Life Itself, Jesus screams into the tomb, “Lazarus, come out!” The exhalation enters the dry bones of Lazarus.

The man wobbles out of the cave, trailing his burial cloths behind him.

The scene is a foretaste of the empty tomb of Jesus.

Jesus here is in full control of his divinity.

He sees the future, assesses the true price of death, and trusts that in death as in new life, Lazarus will glorify God.

Into a world of a thousand little deaths, Jesus still comes.

Consider the forces of death that shroud the world today:

Before there was Covid19, there was human trafficking, depletion of earth's resources, pancreatic cancer, crop failures – all the forces that drive humanity to greed, fear, war, suicide, homicide, terrorism, or nationalism.

Can you picture Jesus standing with humanity and not weeping today?

The source of Life Itself, he feeds and sustains us. He sheds divine tears with us when we suffer loss. I AM life. I AM resurrection.

Wherever and however we meet God in Christ, we experience new hope, new freedom, new life. You and I, baptized into the body of Christ, do we not experience the raising of Lazarus every day?

Are we not given new life, every opportunity, to die to our past selves and rise into God's glory? Does not the breath of Life Itself, the word of God, when spoken still have the power to revive us?

Life is not some achievement test by which we prove our worthiness before God.

The life each of us lives is not just a rehearsal for our appearance in a kingdom by-and-by.

The reign of God began with the Incarnation. God is already doing and still doing a new thing.

Unbound from fear of dying, we are free to engage in God's creative movement in life.

I've seen a bumper sticker:

“If you are walking on thin ice, you might as well dance.”

In our mortal lives, we are walking on thin ice.

We can either tiptoe across life's ice and wonder when we are going to fall in, or dance for as long as we are on top of the ice.

Eugene O'Neill wrote a play in 1927 called “Lazarus Laughed.”

It picks up about where our gospel leaves off.

O'Neill imagines that Lazarus, stirring in the tomb, is seized by the urge to say, “Yes!!!” and then chuckles.

In the play, one of the characters concludes, “We must learn to participate in God's love of life—to feel about this existence of ours the way God feels when God looks at creation and God's own heart is filled with delight.”

Conclusion

Is this my birthday? Or have I just died? Yes!

We will all be Lazarus.

Jesus peers into our own hearts,
scarred by a thousand little deaths,

and declares to each of us,

with all the authority of God our Creator

“I unbind you. Go in peace.”

The Christian is not unbound

from life’s losses and pains.

However, the Christian hope

is that the final word is not pain, but Easter joy.

The message of the cross is not loss, but Life Itself.

Even in the thin ice of final illness, we can dance.

As one preacher explains:

‘We must dance as a witness to our faith.

‘And if we hear some noises that at first startle us,

we are not to assume the ice is breaking.

It could be the laughter of God.’

“See how Jesus loved him.”

But others said, “Could not he

who opened the eyes of the blind one

have kept this man from dying?”

And God, laughing, replies,

“Take away the stone. Unbind him, let him go.”

May it be so for us all.

Amen.