
The Beauty and Agony of Being Reborn

John 11:1-45

Spring's arrival signals to us that our Lenten journey is nearly over. We are now just a week away from Palm Sunday, which begins Holy Week. I hope you'll make plans to worship here on Palm and Easter Sundays. We'll also have a midweek Maundy Thursday Service, as well as a Good Friday Walk and Service with some of the area churches. More details to come.

Today, it's the 5th Sunday of Lent and we are in the Gospel of John. The case against Jesus has been mounting. After all, he's been busy healing people. Like the man lying beside the pool of Bethesda, who had been sick for 38 years . . . and another one born blind, whom Jesus and the disciples meet along a road. It takes more than a prayer for this healing. You'll remember how Jesus mixes dirt from the ground with his own saliva to create a homemade mud-ointment, and that does the trick.

These stories tells *us* the same thing the religious authorities at the time would have seen and heard—That Jesus was no ordinary Rabbi but one with other-worldly influence. This made the religious leaders of the time fearful—fearing that these visible displays of power and authority would draw the eye of the Roman government who may lump Jesus's actions and radical claims in with them, inviting the strong arm of the empire upon the Jewish community who were just trying to fly under the radar and stay alive. So, the religious authorities schemed to silence Jesus.

But he doubles down. And this act is his most divinely powerful yet—a denial of death itself in the raising of his friend, Lazarus. Lazarus had been dead and entombed for four days, it says. That's significant. In Jewish thought, when a person dies, the soul was believed to linger near the grave of the deceased for three days, whereafter it would finally depart. Following the three days, it was

believed that the process of death and decay were irreversible. So, that Lazarus was dead for *four* days was making extra sure that he was well past the point of no return. Was Jesus being fashionably late? Divine timing is often characterized by the idiom that "God is never early, never late, but always right on time!" Well, here, in this miracle trip to see Lazarus, he *is* noticeably late, and well past the eleventh hour. Both Mary and Martha make this point separately: "Why didn't you come earlier, he could have been saved."

There are two other miracle "raising" stories of Jesus in the Gospels. But those two could be categorized as resuscitations. There was Jairus's 12-year-old daughter who was "at the point of death" when Jesus finally arrived, after being delayed en route. There's also the restoring of a widow's only son to life in the town of Nain, in Galilee. The dramatic timing here was emphasized by the fact that Jesus was met on the way into town by the funeral procession heading out of town. Jesus, again, arrives "just in the nick of time". But with Lazarus, it is well past any threshold for a mere resuscitation. Jesus displays power over even death itself.

When I think about the story of Lazarus, I cannot help but hear it in the funny retelling of comedian John Crist, who sees it from Lazarus's perspective. I won't give it to you word-for-word here. You'll have to Google it and watch it for yourself. He says: Everyone who was sad becomes elated when Lazarus walks out of the tomb alive. But we don't think about how Lazarus would have felt, who had been in heaven those 4 days. "Just up there decorating his mansion... everything going great. He had a bum knee, but now he's healed and walking better, shootin' hoops with Noah and Abraham, admiring the streets of gold and all the mansions."

Lazarus had to be thinking: "This is incredible, we're living in paradise with God, worshiping forever, no more pain, no more suffering...we finally made it!" (Then comes a knock on the door) "Excuse me, ummm, is Lazarus here?" "We don't normally do this, but uh, we're going to need to send you back...back to the Middle East with no air conditioning, sorry!"

Not all is joy and celebration in being re-awakened. For starters, we have to reckon with the stench, as the text draws our attention to. Martha makes her protest: "Lord, he has been dead for four days. The smell will be terrible." In the King James Version, it's even more direct, which says "...by this time he stinketh" (11:39)

Theologian Austin Farrer talks about Lazarus's raising from the dead as the "cruel agony of reawaking" into a "light to which your painful eyes must strain on that day of tearful rebirth". I believe the point that both comedian John Crist and Farrer are making here is that rebirth is messy business. Resurrection isn't just the restoring of a life; nor is it reviving it but to a higher place.

Resurrection is transforming a life and setting it back in the messiness of the world. Now, only Lazarus knows what it feels like to come back to life after four days, into the stench of what follows a dying. Yet, we are all called by the light of God out of our own tombs and into new life.

Jesus's voice rings inside the stone-cold tomb: "Lazarus, come out!" (11:43) And we have to first know that rebirth is never our own doing. We do not bring ourselves into this world. We cannot muster up enough moxy to bring ourselves back into new life. We can only trust the Divine Ruach—the animating, life-giving wind of the Spirit—to blow into our dry bones and raise us up. The life of faith is preparing oneself for when that wind blows through. The season of Lent offers us the opportunity to again die to the ways of the world so that the Spirit can begin afresh with us.

The central way we celebrate this truth is through baptism. The waters of baptism represent this watery grave. And before those waters refresh us, bless us, and commission us, they represent a dying. Now, I grew up Baptist, a tradition that practices baptism by immersion and only when one is old enough to make a public profession of faith. In my Presbyterian Polity class this past week, we discussed how Presbyterians practice baptism any number of ways and in all stages of life, even if infant baptism is the most common and even preferred.

Many years ago in seminary, I did my final capstone research project on baptism and came to appreciate how many of the various Christian traditions practice baptism, and found a beauty in the variety.

I was baptized when I was 14 years old. I can remember being in my childhood church raised up and centered in that large baptistry pool in front of a rather large Baptist congregation. My uncle, Dave, who is a minister, and at that time a leader in our youth group, baptized me one Spring Sunday morning. For a young person—or maybe for any person—baptism, especially by immersion, is a fairly dramatic event. I remember being fully submerged backward under those waters, hearing those words: "Buried with Christ in baptism..." and then pulled

back up with a purpose, to the words: "...raised to walk in new life." Once I became an ordained minister, other minister friends and I would joke about holding the baptized under the water according to the amount of perceived sin in someone's life. The more sinful the person, the longer they would be held under to make sure they felt every watery second of that dying before being pulled back up. Don't worry, I don't actually hold to that practice!

Being baptized at all can present something of a struggle for a person, especially if they were never baptized as an infant. There are plenty who are curious about Jesus but shrink back from fully identifying with him in his suffering. Even the Apostle Peter denies when given multiple chances to identify with Jesus and the way of the cross. Many are like Nicodemus, the Pharisee, who came to be known as a "secret believer" because he comes to learn from Jesus in the cloak of darkness and the safety of night. And what is Jesus's lesson to him? What it means to be born again. You get the sense that Nicodemus was looking for something far more convenient, far less dramatic.

The agony of being reborn—represented by the act of baptism—isn't a rising into some heavenly realm. You exit those waters, you burst through grave's door, and back into the mess, muck, and mire of a broken and yet beautiful world, because that is where Christ is. You find Christ weeping at the reality of his friend's dying, and you join Christ in sorrowing for the world. The agony of being reborn is the reality that when one is raised to new life in Christ, it is to a cruciform life, hardly recognizable anymore by the world "who knew you when . . ."

Later in the Gospel of John, we read: "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him." Do you remember when Jesus uttered these words? It wasn't as he was breathing his last breath on the cross, seconds before the "relief" of death. These were his words right after the last supper, as he went out to be betrayed, and only hours before the crucifixion. Isn't that an odd time to claim glory?! These were similar words spoken when he first hears of Lazarus' illness. He says, it will not end in death but was "for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it". (11:4)

This life in Christ holds this odd paradox of glory in agony, of beauty in the mess. And there is an unexpected beauty in being reborn—where the sacrifice, even the stench, of a life of humility and service to one's neighbor is itself a reward and crown . . . Where washing another's feet is a glory all its own. Here's the

kicker: This act of rebirth isn't a one-time deal at some moment of conversion. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross *daily* and follow me". This, then, is a re-commitment we must make even today. May it be so. Amen.