

John 11:1-45

Stop being dead

In a sentence:

More than life after death, the gift of God is life before death

Over the last few weeks we have watched as different characters have bumped into Jesus, and made their responses. Today, we meet two sisters, friends of Jesus, who grieve for their dead brother. We easily identify with the sister Martha, who has the most to say in the story. We know what it is like to lose someone we have loved. We know that pathos-filled longing: if only Jesus/God/whoever had been here, this might not have happened. Believers also know what it's like to have the religious words for the occasion but for those words not to make a lot of sense in the context of loss and grief.

Like us, Martha made her confessions of faith: Jesus is the 'Son of God', 'Messiah' and 'the one coming into the world'. The piteous edge is also here, as if Martha knows what she should say to Jesus because he is Jesus, but also knows that it doesn't really hang together.

And yet, although she doesn't even seem to think that she could have her brother back again, he *is* raised. Unlike for us, her faith-words become real in her being able to embrace Lazarus again. If this is how it happened, then we may rejoice for Martha, but *our* situation and ability to believe is not made any easier. We have similar doctrines to those Martha confesses which, as mere words, are easy to parrot and yet often have about them an air of unreality. Yet it seems that, in addition to those doctrines, *we* here and now have added the apparent invitation to believe what happened to Martha. What was doubtless a marvellous thing for Martha's faith becomes, for us, just another thing we have to believe. Good news which is *someone else's* good news is not really all that good for us! Martha's abundance here is a scarcity to us. Do we not long for such miracles now?

And yet, at the risk of absurdity, there is nothing particularly marvellous about the raising of Lazarus in itself, in one way of looking at it. Of course, it would be a surprising and remarkable thing to happen! But Lazarus will die again; indeed a plot by the religious leaders against Lazarus' life is recounted in the next few verses. Grief has given way to joy, but only for a while. Martha or Mary or some other will again stand outside Lazarus' tomb and grieve.

If all that happens is that Lazarus is resuscitated, then it is not enough. John's point in telling the story is deeper. For the raising of Lazarus is not something for us to 'believe' as a sheer fact about a past event. Those extraordinary words, 'Lazarus, come out', are the same words which were spoken in last week to the man healed of his blindness: 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' (9.35). They are the same words spoken in the week before to the Samaritan woman by the well: 'those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty' (4.14) They are the same words spoken to Nicodemus (the week before that): 'You must be born from above' (3.6).

But there's a difference here, in that while Jesus is turned towards the stinking tomb, he speaks as much to Martha as he does to the dead man. The lectionary epistle reading which complemented last week's gospel ended with a quote, possibly referencing Isaiah 60.1:

*'Sleeper, awake,
rise from the dead
and Christ will shine on you'*

Jesus' words to the dead man, 'Lazarus come out' are just these words, yet spoken not only to Lazarus but also to Martha: 'Awaken and rise, for Jesus shines upon you *as the Christ*'. More important than that a man who lived and died might live a little longer is that life might be breathed into those dead who are *still* breathing, entombed in a dark world. Martha is such a one, as is Mary, and as are we. We are distracted by the reported miracle of the raising of Lazarus, but that (like last week) is not the main point. Just as miraculous is the possibility that faith – and not just orthodoxy's correct religious words – might be resurrected in Martha. As Lazarus is roused from 'sleep' (v.11f) so also is Martha called to faith. They are, in the story, both addressed with the same word. The story is told, then, *not* to suggest that we will believe all the more strongly in Jesus if he should raise one of our dead. The point is that we – still living – are dead with Lazarus, and Jesus would raise *even us*.

And so we need to be explicit about one further thing. Lazarus comes forth, not as a *basis* of Martha's faith, not as a *reason* for her belief, but as the sign of what it means to come to confess Jesus as 'Messiah', and 'Son of God', and 'the one coming into the world', as she did earlier in the story (v.27). Or to put it differently, the point of the story is not that, by raising Lazarus, Jesus proves to Martha that her doctrines about him are true.¹ If that *were* the point then the point would be pointless(!), for it leaves *us* with nothing but a story about what happened to someone else, and implies that *we* couldn't come to belief without similar spectacle.

It is interesting – and even surprising – that, despite the lament of Martha and her sister, we don't actually hear of their response to the raising of Lazarus. Perhaps it is obvious, at the personal and emotional level. Yet the whole exchange has not been about grief and joy, not about loss and restoration, but about unbelief and belief. Jesus rebukes Martha when she protests at the opening of the tomb: 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' There is a promise made here to the faithful – 'believing is seeing' (which is *not* 'seeing is believing').

But we should push this a step further: to believe is not simply to see that glory, but more significantly to *become*, the glory of God. The human person unbound by death – whether our own or the death of those we love – such a person is 'the glory of God'. This is what Jesus means when he declares, 'Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die (11.25f)'. The hearts of such faithful ones will one day stop beating, but such death is as nothing(...) to those who are truly alive. It is the same Jesus who challenges Martha as calls out to Lazarus, and this challenge and call are the same – Sleeper, awake; stop being dead, for Christ shines upon you.

¹ It's worth noting that immediately following the undisputed 'fact' of the raising of Lazarus there is not only belief but also unbelief – not in the resuscitation of Lazarus but in Jesus – which results in a renewed vigor in the plot to kill Jesus. At the same time, v.46 goes on to speak of 'many of the Jews' who saw what happened subsequently coming to faith. The miracle *is* apparently the catalyst of their believing. Nevertheless, the miracle which is offered to us *today* is not the event which might stand behind this story but faith in the declaration that Jesus rouses life in the living dead.

Lazarus, then, becomes the archetypal person of faith by making the faithful response to the call of God in Christ, awakening from his 'sleep'. Lazarus is the true believer. His faithful response to Christ's command models what should be Martha's, and ours: to rise, to shine, to bask in the glory of the God who called us forth, and to *become* that glory in a world which cries out desperately, 'Lord, if you had been here, death would have had no sting.'

Sleepers, awake; stop being dead, and become the glory of the God, which is the Body of Christ alive, dead and alive again.
