

## Week 5

*...Awaken us to glory...*

John's gospel was written around the end of the first century. By this time, the early church was well into its third generation of believers. The expectations of Jesus' imminent return had faded and this "delay" had produced a crisis of faith. They lived and died as followers of Jesus without seeing any sign of the coming of God's Kingdom. Those they had loved remained in their tombs, seemingly lost to death. Lazarus and his return from the tomb is a story unique to John's gospel and its provocative narrative urged John's community to hope for salvation even when faced with the reality of death. It was a direct response to their lament: "Our tombs are filling and yet you delay! Our grief is too much!"

Whatever history is involved in the detail of Lazarus' resuscitation, John has moved the story beyond history and into gospel – that is, good news. The central focus is not Lazarus. Like the man whose blindness allowed Jesus to be seen as the light of the world, the death of Lazarus is the means to demonstrate that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Jesus has already signalled that hour has come when the dead will leave their graves at the sound of his voice (5:25.28).

There is a profound friendship between Jesus, Martha, Mary and Lazarus but on hearing the news of Lazarus' illness, Jesus hesitates to visit. By the time Jesus arrives at the outskirts of Bethany, Lazarus is very dead – for four days. Although both sisters had sent for him, only Martha goes out to meet him. Mary, with a heart too heavy to move, stays in the house. In Martha's greeting, there is a hint of disappointment that Jesus had not arrived earlier. Martha's words give voice to John's community's confusion at Jesus' overdue return. Martha calls Mary in a whisper, perhaps attempting to hide Jesus' presence from "the Jews". Mary jumps to her feet and goes out to meet him. She throws herself before Jesus, repeating Martha's words of faithful sorrow at his delay.

At the beginning of the gospel account, Jesus appears undisturbed at Lazarus' death. In fact, Jesus tells his disciples that he is "glad", because now there is a chance that they will believe in him. But upon greeting Mary, seeing her tears and those accompanying her, Jesus' emotional state changes. John uses a Greek word that is associated with anger to describe Jesus' distress. Possibly the sadness

and reality of Lazarus' death hits home as Jesus is touched by the grief around him. In John's gospel, though, Jesus is always in control of events and he went to Bethany with the stated intention of taking charge of the situation.

Another possible interpretation is that upon seeing the tears of grief, Jesus was greatly distressed by their lack of faith. Luke records a moment of frustration with mourners in the account of raising Jairus' daughter (Lk 8:52). Until Mary's weeping, only "the Jews" are identified as mourning.<sup>1</sup> Now Mary has joined them. Has she lost faith in Jesus? Mary's despair symbolises the communal despair of John's community as they waited with increasing uncertainty for Jesus' return.

In a striking description, John simply says, "Jesus wept". The Greek word used for Jesus' weeping is different from the word used to describe the crying of the mourners. Perhaps when Jesus saw that they had placed Lazarus in a tomb, he was moved to tears by their loss of hope. Perhaps seeing the tomb triggered emotions about his own destiny. Perhaps Jesus simply responded the way human beings do when standing before the tomb of someone they loved. Regardless, Jesus wept.

Despite earlier professing faith in Jesus, Martha sees no point in rolling away the stone. For Martha, Lazarus is dead and the stench of death will prove this, but Jesus offers her one more opportunity to believe in him.

After offering a prayer, Jesus cries out into the darkness of death and summons the dead man to life. This is not a resurrection, but a resuscitation. It is a sign of the passage that Jesus will soon take, beyond *his* tomb and into eternal life. It is this journey that will forever liberate Lazarus and every human being from the bonds of death. "Unbind him and let him go free" is Jesus' last words in the story. It is a direction to live in the hope and knowledge that death, in all its forms, does not have the final say.

It wasn't simply Lazarus who needed to be brought back to life. Mary, Martha, the disciples and the gathered mourners, all needed to be drawn beyond the world they knew. This grieving community could only see death. When Lazarus emerged, they knew that the gift of life stood in their very presence. John shapes the story to assure his community that, even in seeming absence, Jesus was still powerful and

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Maloney, *Sacra Pagina*, "The Gospel of John" (The Liturgical Press: Minnesota, 1998) 330.

active among them. Jesus' presence is a reality for us as well. Beyond all the ways in which we choose death, beyond all the "tombs" in which we choose to dwell, lies the promise of God who never ceases to call us a new and more abundant life.

- For last three weeks we have heard from John's gospel. These stories are told with the initiation of new Christians in mind, but they also capture the spirit of the journey from death to new life that every Christian is asked to undertake each Lent. How have these readings spoken about your own Lenten pilgrimage this year? How have you sensed "new life" emerging in you?
- "Unbind him and let him go free!" are some of the most powerful words of the gospel. It is Jesus' direction to those standing near Lazarus. It is a call to forgiveness, love and friendship. A Christian community is summoned to free others from the burdens that hold them back and hinder them from living a fully human life. How does your community assist to unbind others and let them go free?
- Jesus loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus. The communion of friendship was an important to Jesus. In what ways has communion of friendship been a gift your life?
- Standing at the entrance to the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus wept. What do you think prompted this response from Jesus?