

LAZARUS UNBOUND

Sunday, September 1, 2019
The Rev. Barbara E. Davis
John 11:1-6, 17-29 & 30-45

I'm pretty sure my fascination with Lazarus began in college. Sure, I knew the story. As most kids who grew up memorizing Bible verses, I longed for the ever-desirable shortest verse in the Bible, verse 35 of John 11, "Jesus wept." But this story wasn't a favorite of mine as a kid the way it became over the years. I suspect that my interest in Lazarus in the early '90's was linked to the book *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Although the book was decades old, Martin Scorsese's film version had come out in 1988 and was, of course, controversial. Being a woman of the book, I don't actually remember seeing the movie until much later, but I do remember reading the book which was so prominently displayed in bookstores at the time. In particular, I remember Lazarus.

Lazarus, who although he was raised from death, still smelled like the grave and lingered at the table in his strips of cloth, gruesomely depicted with Mary and Martha removing worms from his skin. Lazarus, who having been dead, was never really the same again. Since reading that book, I became a collector of Lazarus references in literature, music, film, television and poetry. I sought Lazarus out and stumbled across him. He would appear in poetry; his name titled an episode in season three of *Dr. Who*; there are lists online of the many depictions of Lazarus on film. Lazarus, a one-hit wonder in Biblical terms, is a now a cultural icon.

Being a disorganized collector of these kinds of Lazarus references, you can imagine my surprise earlier this summer when I came across Rick Moody's essay, "Notes on Lazarus" in the *Best American Essays 2018*. Moody had me at the first sentence: "What do we know about Lazarus of Bethany?"ⁱ

He asks many other questions we all have about Lazarus: "Why is it that Jesus feels such waves of grief at Lazarus's death, when he knows already that resurrecting Lazarus is possible?"ⁱⁱ "And what did Lazarus feel?"ⁱⁱⁱ and "what does Lazarus tell us about death, *in the end*?" If he could talk to us now, in our tongue, what would he say?"^{iv} Memorably, Moody declares that "Lazarus is a revival-tent miracle" and exclaims, "Oh to have been a bystander!"^v Oh, yes. A bystander indeed. Who we want to be in this story may tell a great deal about our spiritual understanding of the story.

The first information we as readers get at the beginning of John 11 is the biographical snapshot of Lazarus of Bethany. This mention of him is the first in this gospel and he is identified not by himself, but as the brother of Mary and Martha, who are also mentioned here by name for the first time this gospel.

We learn that Jesus will not go to Lazarus right away; that something bigger is at play in this situation, something which will lead to God's glory. As if to reassure us, the story confirms that Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. If we are honest, it still feels a little odd, this use of Lazarus's sickness unto death to glorify God. It may be necessary, but it is not comfortable.

Two days later, Jesus arrives to find Lazarus has already died and been buried for four days. The grief around Mary and Martha is palpable. Friends have come from nearby Jerusalem to support the sisters. Jesus and Martha begin having a very interesting yet seemingly ill-timed theological conversation about resurrection. It is the core explanation of *why* Jesus did not come right away. Martha returns and Mary comes to him with the same heartfelt plea, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

The scene shifts here from the theological to the emotional and in so doing, it pulls us away from the theological discomfort. The weeping, the grief, the disappointment from Martha and Mary, the doubt among those in the crowd, it is all building to a crescendo of emotions at the stone in front of Lazarus's grave. Then the story becomes very practical. The smell of the body decomposing is mentioned, for fear of allowing more of the stench out of the tomb by removing the stone. Presumably Jesus is outside the tomb and Lazarus is inside the tomb, when Jesus calls loudly to him, "Lazarus, come out!" When Lazarus appears, he is still bound in strips of cloth, his hands, his feet, his face. And then a final word from Jesus, "Unbind him, let him go."

It is an anti-climactic ending. We are left with so many questions. Not the least of which are how did Mary and Martha react? Did they embrace him? Throw themselves on him, arms wrapped around his neck? Did they kiss his revealed face? Soothe him with their words, with ointments and touch? We know the crowds were amazed. What did Lazarus look like? Feel like? How did he walk? What did he say? Was he like the thankful leper who rushed toward Jesus? Was he like a zombie, alive but with flesh eaten away like he just stumbled off the set of the Thriller video? Those answers are all left to our imagination.

And what imaginations we have about Lazarus. As Moody shares in his examples, everyone from artists like Caravaggio and Rembrandt, musicians from David Bowie to Nick Cave, poets like Rilke and Wright, Sexton and Clifton, just to name a few, have imagined this scene. Maybe Lazarus fascinates us precisely because the answer is not spelled out for us. It is so full of allegorical imagery of Jesus' own death and resurrection it is easy to lose Lazarus in his own resurrection. Images of the stone before Jesus' own tomb come into our mind. The strips of cloth that still bind Lazarus are unwrapped from Jesus and folded and left at the head of where his body had been. They are so similar and yet so different.

Moody mentions in his essay a sermon he heard about Lazarus where the preacher felt compelled to break this news to the congregation, "Unfortunately I must disappoint those of you, who because of this story, are hoping for the resurrection of your own relatives."^{vi} I suppose that's my role today, and I spent some time really thinking about that idea this week. Is that even remotely what this story provides? Does Lazarus get our hopes up? Should he? What's going on here seems more ambiguous. We don't see any joy in this scene. The emotions are all before Lazarus is raised. Even in its happy ending this story leaves us heavy, unsettled, unsure of why Lazarus, and what his life was like afterward.

Not Biblically, but traditionally there seems to be plenty of thought that Lazarus obviously didn't live forever. Nor did he, like Jesus after him, or Elijah before him, just get swept up into heaven. He has to go through dying again at some point. Which, understandably, makes us uncomfortable.

If Lazarus is not just allegorical, and not particularly cheerful, does it provide us with hope of some kind? I had started off the week thinking maybe Lazarus's story is about transformation, about who we become, who we can become when we respond to being called forth. But the more I read the story, the more I read people's interpretations of the unanswered parts of the story, the more questions I had. It occurred to me that part of what I like about Lazarus's resurrection story spiritually is how messy it is. We are left to our imaginations to figure out how he was unbound, what he looked like after he was unbound, what he smelled like, what he did, how he acted. He is just so *human*...

Lazarus's humanity is front and center in this story. We know, don't we, that Lazarus is a lot like us. We know that resurrection in the metaphorical sense of the word don't just happen with three words and we burst our way back into the light. We have to be unbound and *that* is hard work. Being unbound when we lose our struggle with addiction again and have to seek help and forgiveness of our loved ones is hard. Being unbound when depression overtakes us is hard work. Being unbound when relationships fall apart is hard. Being unbound when fears about our kids are suddenly founded is hard. Being unbound

when we have out-lived so many of our loved ones and loneliness creeps up on us is hard. Being unbound when the diagnosis keeps our bodies distant from us is hard. Being unbound when the treatment feels worse than the disease is hard. Being unbound when the politics of our world seem so cruel and divisive is hard.

We know the messiness of being unbound, it doesn't just happen with a few steps over a threshold. If we're honest, we might even confess that sometimes that messiness keeps us from even trying. Because this we also know, when Lazarus is unbound, he's someone different than who he was in the tomb, feeling his way toward Jesus' voice. Healing, recovery, grieving is a patient process and it is not without messiness of our humanness. Unbinding takes perseverance and hope, and it takes staying in Lazarus's shoes, if you will.

What is compelling about the Lazarus story is the hope that *we* will walk out of the tomb, in all our messy human glory. What Lazarus teaches us is that resurrection is human. It is about bad smells and darkness and change, joy and hope. Lazarus's story is not just about joy. His story is about a hope that is messy, sad, joyful, all at once.

The psychologist Joan Bolker reminds us, "Every major life change destroys the equilibrium of our lives and our self-image and leaves behind a portion of the old self. Most of us are on some level conservatives; even if the new self is better, we feel some sadness at leaving the old one."^{vii} Lazarus embodies this destruction of our equilibrium. He gives us room to grieve our resurrections; he gives us permission to walk slowly. But we should remember, he does come out. He twists to the light. He stumbles forward. Our hope is to be unbound with Lazarus. We are not bystanders at his tomb. We are him. And like him, we are reminded what it means to be fully human and loved, no matter how much we change.

ⁱⁱ Moody, Rick. 2018. "Notes on Lazarus." *The Best American Essays 2018*. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: New York) p. 132.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, 132.

^{iv} Ibid, 133.

^v Ibid, 145.

^{vi} Ibid, 133.

^{vii} Ibid, 133.

^{viii} Bolker, Joan. 1998. *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day*. (Henry Holt: New York) p. 128.