

All Saints Day Cycle B

John 11:32-44

This gospel is full of interesting tidbits. Let's begin with something cultural. Not only does this snippet explain some of the text, it begins to open a door, not completely, but partially, into what the passage is about. I direct you to the statement that Lazarus has been dead four days.

Why is this in the story? Why, specifically, four days? Why not six?

Comment: Because the culture says that something happens within four days?

Yes, good. Hebrew anthropology wasn't quite like ours. The soul or nephesh, remained in the vicinity of the body for three days, and there is some indication that during that three day period death was progressing but not yet complete. So during that time, magical intervention to reverse the process, if you had access to powerful magic, might still be possible. This explains why Lazarus is dead four days: had it been three there would still be some question of Jesus's ability to overcome death. The nephesh would still have been in the vicinity of the body.

So on the fourth day death was unquestionable and complete. The nephesh has left the area of the body. The process of death is over and it's time to begin to get on to life. Jesus restores Lazarus to life after complete, not partial or provisional death.

Now, a second little thing from the story. The story takes great care to, somehow, join the human world and the world of the dead together. Notice, for instance, the need to roll the stone away from the tomb. The dead man does not just exit the tomb by going through its walls. Spirits do that, but not embodied people. So the stone has to be rolled away in order that it be a person and not a spirit encountered in the subsequent parts of the story.

This is a major theme in several places in the New Testament. For instance, when Jesus is walking on the water on the Sea of Galilee during a storm, what do the disciples think he is when they first see him? They think he's a spirit or ghost and are afraid. In the Lucan resurrection narratives, Jesus appears among his disciples, they believe he is a ghost and he eats a piece of fish before them in order to reassure them. So a number of examples from the New Testament on this attempt to say that whatever it is that God intends for the dead, it is not just a disembodied spiritual intention.

This brings up all sorts of problems. The first one is personal-emotional. Philosophically, it's not too serious, psychologically it's plenty important. My body is beginning to cause me enough trouble I'm not at all sure I want to take it to eternity with me. So there's always some sort of reassurance in Biblical resurrection accounts that no, we're not talking about bodies that cause trouble or wear out. This is the kind of reassurance one sees in Revelation – God's intention is a realm in which sorry and sighing are no more.

But there's a more important point being made. To illustrate, let's go back to The Revelation to John. What is it the author sees in the last chapter? What he doesn't see is an unearthly

paradise into which people are transformed. What he does see is a new heaven and a new earth. The Christian idea of salvation is always a salvation of that which is. It is not being transferred into some strange and unearthly realm which leaves this one behind. If we think about what we mean when we say that Christ saves us or that God is a merciful and saving God, if we have any sense of what language means, it means that what is saved is this world, and not some part of it which is whisked away to somewhere else.

It is not a paradise on some other planet, physical or not, it is a new earth, a new here.

Just as a side light, because I can't resist. Notice also, and this is sometimes missed in the interpretative process, that there's a new heaven. Even the realm of that immediate to God is touched by the evil and failure present in the world. Heaven can only be the perfection and completion of the creation, so any failure in the earthly creation touches the heavenly also. For God's will to be completely done means that not only are we separated from evil, but that which is the root cause, and core of evil is also removed from the creation. This is largely what the Book of Revelation is about, an analysis of the process, not of what happens to sinful people, the author doesn't care much about that – but an analysis of God's removal of that which causes sinning in the first place. Read the book with that in mind sometime. It is a revelation.

Furthermore, The Book of Revelation says that God's main interest, when God acts on human behalf, he acts to remove the cause of sin. The process of Judgment, that is, as to whether or not one deserves presents from Santa, is trivial in comparison to that which is, according to the author of Revelation, the true and real task of God: the conquest of the root cause of evil, not sorting through the results of it. I think this, by the way, is a far more profound and worthy role for God than to have God be the one who says, well, you didn't keep the rules, so it's greasespotville for you. A God who can only judge is a rather trivial god. But a God who can erode and somehow overcome that which causes the fault line running across the created world, that's a God worth not only our attention, but also our devotion. That is what, I think, the author of Revelation sees clearly. The task is not the separation of good from bad, but the overcoming, understanding first and then overcoming, of that which allows evil to exist in the creation in the first place. The author of Revelation does not think evil is a natural part of the world. He believes it to be an intrusion and to be overcomable. End of sideline. Now, back to Lazarus.

So the stone is rolled away and Jesus says, "Lazarus, come out." And the man comes out, but he doesn't come out free. He is still bound, he still carries with him the signs of his death. His hands and feet are bound with strips of cloth and his face is wrapped with a piece of cloth. And Jesus says to the bystanders, "You unbind him and let him go." It is, ultimately, the human community, inside the church it is ultimately the communion of saints, which is instructed by Christ to deal with the impact of death and to free people from it, in all the various ways we may be freed from the reality and impact of death. "You unbind him and let him go." And the process of Lazarus's resurrection is not complete until the human bystanders play their role. The role of the human community in freeing from the effect and impact of death is strongly affirmed in this passage. So often it comes off as merely Jesus's power over death. The part that I'm choosing to emphasize, Jesus's instructions to the bystanders, gets swept away. After all, it would be nice if we weren't responsible for each other's lives and deaths.

It is not only in this lesson, but in the rest of the New Testament also, that Jesus's instruction to the bystanders is the final significant point to a story. Therefore, according to the rules of ancient rhetoric, we would expect such instruction to be the keystone of the story's arch. This story is not primarily about Jesus's power to overcome death, although that's an important piece of it. It is primarily about the fact that the power of Christ to overcome death is not complete until the community of those who love him is also engaged in that overcoming. "You unbind him and let him go." Until you do, he cannot. We are not just to overcome the effects of sin in ourselves, but the effects of death in others. How that's to be done is another story. For now, don't forget that your faith is as concerned, if not more so, with the overcoming of death in this world as it is of sin.

That's all I have to say about that. Please stand for the creed.