



**A Community of Eternal Life**  
**Lent 5: April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2017**  
**The Revd Jenny Wilkens**  
*Ezekiel 37:1-14*  
*John 11:1-45*

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What a wonderfully powerful story our Gospel reading is. I think what I love about it is it is as if we are watching a play, and we watch the strongly drawn characters experiencing a whole spectrum of emotions. And Jesus himself is not immune from this too – we see Jesus in all his power, but also in all his humanity and vulnerability.

I wonder if you noticed a word that is used 9 times through this chapter. It is the word *believe*, one of John's key words in the Gospel, and it comes up again and again: so that you may believe, do you believe?, Yes Lord I believe, did I not tell you that if you believed, many believed in him...

John says at the end of his gospel that he has written about the signs that Jesus did 'so that you may come to **believe** that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through **believing**, you may have *life* in his name'. (John 20:31)

That is the crux of our Gospel today – here John presents to us the greatest sign there could be that Jesus is indeed God, that even that last great enemy, death, is subject to him, and that he has the power to give life and to grant life anew.

That is wonderful, but perhaps what is more accessible to us is that we're given a picture too of Jesus in all his humanity. We learn that for Jesus also, death is not negligible, he is not immune to its consequences, death touches him as much as it touches us.

But if we go back to the beginning of the story, we get a rather different impression of Jesus, quite a mysterious one really. It almost seems as if Jesus is orchestrating this great miracle. He hears his great friend Lazarus is ill, but he does not rush to his side to save him; in fact, the reverse, Jesus stays where he is in seclusion for two long days. We find it hard to comprehend his delaying tactics, although we do hear from Thomas that Jesus would be putting himself in real danger if he ventures near Jerusalem, such is the growing opposition to him. Is Jesus wrestling with this dilemma?

Or is there something in Jesus staying away as long as possible so that it is clear beyond any possible doubt that Lazarus is dead, so that when his family and friends see life emerging from the tomb rather than the stench of decay, they will know that it wasn't just Lazarus recovering from a period of unconsciousness or coma, that he was indeed dead and is now alive.

John doesn't elaborate on Jesus' motives for biding his time, but when Jesus finally arrives, Martha certainly doesn't let him get away with it! Martha comes out to meet Jesus, and quite fairly I think reproaches him – if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Jesus does not criticise her in return, rather he entrusts her with the most amazing claim. It is not just that Jesus trusts God to bring resurrection, but rather that resurrection is found in him: **'I am** the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live.'

(John 11:25) And then he challenges her to believe - do you believe this? And Martha responds with a great declaration of faith: 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.' Martha is John's gospel's model believer!

What an affirmation of Martha's faith! But what are we seeing of Jesus? So far in the story you could almost say that Jesus seems quite impassive, unmoved really, that he is just here to demonstrate his power and to talk theology...but then suddenly when Jesus meets Mary, sees her and those with her weeping and mourning, the reality of his friend Lazarus's death seems to finally hit home. Even though Jesus knows he is the resurrection and the life, yet the tears and the grief and the loss of death finally take hold of him.

First of all we hear Jesus was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved, the words really have a sense of being greatly disturbed at gut-level, and there's also the dimension of indignation, of frustration and anger at the pain and havoc that death wreaks in people's lives. And then Jesus weeps – the shortest verse in the Bible, but yet it's one of those extraordinary moments when we seem to see right into the very heart of God.

Jesus has come to demonstrate God's absolute power of life over death, and yet he reacts as we all do to a life cut short, to the desolation of losing someone we love, and he shares the pain of those who mourn, he weeps with them.

And it is this Jesus, human, shaken, mourning, who then goes to Lazarus' tomb and raises him from the dead. It is not just an impersonal act of calm and majestic power, but rather an act of gut-wrenching faith and hope that love is stronger than death.

Jesus prays to the Father, and calls Lazarus out from the tomb, and out he comes, alive, whole, new! As simple as that! – and as mind-blowing as that!

But do you notice that the one character we don't hear from in this story is Lazarus himself! We don't hear anything about how Lazarus feels about it all. Imagine journalists vying to get that first interview with Lazarus for the news! Just what was it like, Lazarus?

Eugene O'Neill once wrote a play entitled *Lazarus Laughed*. The play deals with what happened to Lazarus in the years *after* Jesus called him back to life. In the play Lazarus comes out of his grave *laughing...*

a soft, tender, all-embracing sort of sound that seems to well up from a joy that is utterly bottomless. There is a radiance emanating from him that makes him look younger than when he died. There is a peace and serenity about his being that is absolutely tangible. As soon as Lazarus gets home, his sisters ask him the inevitable question: Well, what is it like beyond the grave?

Lazarus says this, 'There is only life. There is only laughter... the laughter of God soaring into the heights and the depths. There is no death really. Death is not the end, it's not an abyss or the entrance into nothingness or chaos or punishment. Death is a portal, a passageway into deeper and brighter life. Eternal change, everlasting growth...that is what lies ahead. There is only life, sisters, nothing but life.'

As the play unfolds, Lazarus goes on to live a life in which he is freed from the fear of death. He lives knowing that Jesus is truly the 'Resurrection and the Life.'

Perhaps in that is a message for us all. For what we see in the raising of Lazarus is a foretaste of that hope that is offered to us all through Jesus' own death and resurrection, the hope that God will not let us go but will keep us in his life and love, through death into life eternal.

Of course meanwhile we experience our own griefs and pains - the death of our loved ones; and also the daily trials of life that sometimes seem to sink us into despair and hopelessness.

But John tells us that Christ brings us into being part of a community of eternal life, now! We're invited to embrace Jesus as the resurrection and the life not only at times of death and grief, but also in the daily reality of life now, this moment, not just sometime in the distant future. And so resurrection can happen in any situation in the *present*, not just in some unidentified future.

There is a strong message in John's gospel, that we who have faith in Christ have already passed over from the realm of death into the realm of eternal life, and that we live already with those we love who have died, in the community of eternal life.

Of course we still know the grief and pain of physical separation from our loved ones now. Sandra Schneiders<sup>1</sup> writes of John 11, 'We are not asked *not* to weep, but [we are asked] ***not to despair***, for [Jesus] the one in whom we believe is our resurrection, because he is our life'. We know too that we still have to go through physical death ourselves, but in the communion of saints, we are already sharing fellowship with those who are in Christ, the resurrection and the life. As our liturgy says, we worship together with the angels and the archangels and *all the company of heaven*. (NZPB p. 422)

Those of us who've been reflecting about the Eucharist in our Lent groups have been reminded that it is sometimes called a foretaste of heaven, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet we will share in Christ's presence with all God's people.

So when we share in eucharist, we are already entering into the life of heaven, we are participating in the life to come. The life of our future is breaking into our present life, and giving us hope.

And as we gather around Christ's table, we are in miniature a community of eternal life, feeding on Christ so that we may better live in the light of that eternal life which is ours, and so that we may go out with hope and faith for the people and situations on our hearts. So then, let us come again today and feed on Christ with faith and thanksgiving, knowing that he is our Resurrection and our Life. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra Schneiders, *Written that you may believe: encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*. New York: Crossroad Publications, 1999, 161.