

Sermon March 26, 2023

John 9.1-45

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There is a story told about the famous psychiatrist Carl Jung, when one of his patients came to him excited about a dream he had had about the good doctor, which for him explained his therapy. The dream went like this, he said. I was in a swimming pool but it was filled with mud. I grabbed the side hoping to pull myself out, and you came along, stepped on my fingers and said, "Not out of it. Through it."

Martha and Mary had hoped that Jesus would have healed their brother and brought him out of his sickbed, but Jesus had other designs. We know those women, we are those women. We will take extraordinary measures to stay alive, to "conquer" cancer (which our house knows something about), to avoid heart attacks, etc. etc. Sometimes we regard death as a punishment, as God declared to Adam and Eve when kicking them out of the Garden. If we get sick or die, we think we or someone has failed. Very often we don't even want to talk about fatal illness and death.

Jesus, however, delays going to Lazarus for two days in order to make death the subject. Now the Martha, Mary and Lazarus household means a lot to Jesus. We meet them several times in the Gospels. When Jesus is doing his hit-and-run tactics in Holy Week he disappears at night over the hill into Bethany to their home. They are his loving family.

Which is why we catch Jesus weeping too. (Some of you memorized as kids the shortest verse in the King James bible, "Jesus wept.") He is no god disguised as a man, he is a human being with a heart that grieves with the others at the death of a friend, regardless of what will follow.

Our first response to death of any kind is grief. Pray for those unable to grieve, say, the death of a child, a spouse, their experience as soldier or civilian in war, their harm done intentionally or not to another. Pray for us too as we fail to grieve--for the species which we eliminate from the earth every year, for the waters flowing through your city and mine whose pollution will no longer let us eat their fish. Like Christ Jesus, our early response to death of any kind needs to be grief, or else we start to become partially dead ourselves. Some of you know this all too well.

This story for the Gospel of John is of course a run-up to the resurrection to come on Easter day. Like the raising of Lazarus, that too will show God's power to bring life out of death. So don't follow the rabbit trail "How did he do that?" It goes nowhere because when God brings life out of death it always seems a mystery. This is why "faith" is much closer to "trust" than it is "belief." Some have said that believe for us is a verb, not a noun. It moves.

So we can talk about the circumstances of an addict's transformed life, but there is mystery in the how and when. We can list factors but we don't know the chemistry of the peaceful revolution out of apartheid in South Africa. Life out of death. On and on. We know it is true. We can trust.

Mary and Martha know Jesus is Messiah and can go so far as affirming resurrection at the end of the world, but not something that goes on right here and right now. That is what "incarnation" means—bringing hope out of despair, finding a way through when all the ways out are blocked, God's meddlesome Spirit beckoning us to new life all the way along. In fact, I believe the Spirit gives us that mud-filled pool sometimes just so we learn to trust more than our own wits; to lean on God to produce a better way.

That is how we practice resurrection. Now resurrection does not mean we live forever. For all of us, our bodies go kaput. Organizations and countries likewise do not live forever. Some go a short time, others longer. Both people and collective entities die, and they both can also take new life—actual life, not death-dealing or selfish activity.

When I read the Gospel the voice I give Jesus at the tomb just gets louder as the years go by. Those words, "Lazarus, come out." always pierce to the quick any doubts I am carrying about resurrection, about God's ability to bring good things out of some of our awful human foul-ups.

I invite you to join me in rolling away the stone of stoicism and invulnerability shielding your heart, and letting Jesus' commanding shout echo through every niche in your tomb where hopelessness is buried, to loose the gravecloths that bind you, and come forth to life. Christ Jesus came so that we might practice resurrection right here, right now.

You all are going through an important life stage as a Cathedral, too. I don't know if this passage offers anything of what you need. In order to practice resurrection there needs to have been a death. Does the story go that far for you? Has there been a death of purpose or identity or direction or something else? How long has Lazarus been in your tomb? Is new life emerging from a tomb but held back by the wrapping of gravecloths? You can work the story's images.

Again, I don't know your situation very much. I do know that faith is a community action as well as an individual one. We Easter people practice resurrection in ministry, in community life, and in our hearts and souls.

May our Lord bless you on your way. As St. Augustine said, God became human so that humans might become divine.And practice resurrection.