

At first sight, the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead is a straightforward hero to the rescue story. Just like in lots of other tales of people with magic powers, Jesus arrives at a situation that is beyond the capacity of ordinary human beings to change, transforms it, and everyone lives happily ever after. Powerful, inspiring, encouraging... or is it?

The more I read the story, the more I find myself struggling with difficult questions:

- Did it really happen? There's a lot of symbolism in John's gospel, so should we see this as representing any actual event at all?
- If Jesus can do this, why didn't he do it more often? What's special about Lazarus?
- Why didn't Jesus get there before he died?
- What are we to take away from a story that is at such a remove from anything we are likely to encounter? Or to put it another way, why did John include it in his Gospel as one of the "signs" that Jesus did?

Answering all of those in order would end up sounding more like an essay on John's gospel than a sermon, but I'll try and share some of my own ways of dealing with these as we go along.

First of all, it's worth getting the scene straight in our minds, in order to understand what's going on. This all takes place about half-way through John's gospel, so that should give us a signal. Jesus is already under threat of arrest (John 10:39) and he and the disciples have taken refuge 'across the Jordan'. The result of this episode is that the authorities plan for Jesus to be executed (11:53). Jesus makes a second visit to Bethany shortly after this in chapter 12, and then goes on to enter Jerusalem on a donkey, which we will be marking next week on Palm Sunday.

So, in John's gospel this is a turning point, even though it is an event not recorded in the other gospels. [Martha and Mary appear in Luke, with the famous scene of Mary listening to Jesus and Martha doing the catering (Luke 10:38-42). Lazarus is only mentioned here, although Jesus uses the name in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)]

And it is true that John likes to bring out the symbolism in events and locations, but that doesn't mean we should dismiss his ability to record history. Around the end of the nineteenth century, his gospel was seen by many academics as being written long after Jesus' earthly ministry, and they thought that John created a lot of the detail. Then archaeologists discovered the pool of Bethesda from John 5, and since then his historical information has been taken more seriously.

Whatever we think *actually* happened with Lazarus in this story, there is good reason to think that John believed he was recording events that occurred, as well as highlighting their meaning.

Now, if you heard that a close friend was seriously ill, you would get in contact with them or a relative. Maybe you'd try and phone, or perhaps send a card. Before the days of covid-19, you would probably want to visit, and the restrictions we are now under are placing a lot of strain on people who want to be close to critically ill loved-ones. It's a natural instinct to want to be there.

If your visit could have a positive impact on someone's recovery, you would make that visit a top priority, unless there were very good reasons to stop you. Why didn't Jesus go when he heard the

news? It doesn't make any sense at first reading, unless you believe that poor old Lazarus had to die to serve the purpose of being a visual aid for Jesus.

In the sequence John gives us, Jesus only shares the news of Lazarus' illness with his followers in verse 11, so the message came privately and he kept the news to himself. His stay for 2 days in the place where he was is described as being out his love for his 3 friends. I go with Tom Wright's comments on this - that Jesus chooses to stay where he was (v.6) because he needed time to pray, to think and to wrestle with this terrible choice between two unpleasant outcomes. We know from the rest of the story that going to Bethany would set off events that lead to the crucifixion. The choice was to let his friend die, or endanger 12 disciples and himself.

All of us feel conflicted sometimes, but they seem very acute for Jesus. We see that in the Garden of Gethsemane when he is in anguish about whether to go through with things at all or run away. However we understand the idea of Jesus being human and divine, the gospels record deep struggles of conscience, and this needed time for prayer. And I find that strangely reassuring. It wasn't all easy for Jesus, so that means he gets it when it's not all easy for us. Jesus isn't an alien being trying to be human, he *is* human and so somehow in the mystery of who God is, there is understanding for the difficult predicaments we get ourselves into.

Then Jesus decides: they're going to Judea – to Bethany. The disciples clearly know the risks, and Thomas states it bluntly “let us also go, that we may die with him”. Whether it's a statement of resignation and despair, or loyalty and commitment is hard to know, but Thomas seems to know the risks. Jesus knows them too, and he knows that confronting death at Lazarus' tomb will be only a foretaste on the confrontation to come.

Then Jesus arrives, and Martha meets him outside the house. If we were Martha, I suspect we wouldn't be able to control ourselves – who wouldn't? “If you had been here, he'd be alive” is a brutal accusation. The Bible is full of people being honest and blunt with God about their feelings – just read a few psalms to see their despair, their needs and their fears. God wants honesty far more than he desires politeness, and Martha demonstrates this perfectly to us.

Notice that Jesus doesn't rebuke Martha for speaking so boldly. Although their conversation reveals that Martha believes in resurrection one day – as many Jews did by the time of Jesus – that's not what she wants at this moment. She wants Lazarus alive and well, as did her sister Mary, who restates Martha's point. We know from Luke of her devotion to Jesus, and it seems to connect. John describes Jesus as deeply moved. In the 16th century, when the Bible was given chapters and verses (they're not in the original texts), it gave us the shortest verse in English bibles, John 11:35, “Jesus wept”. Just before the story moves on to what we call the passion, we see Jesus' emotional state, as he sees the sisters and others there who were grieving, and he felt it too for his friends.

The next part of the scene prefigures Easter in a number of ways – a tomb made out of a cave, a stone needing to be rolled away, and linen strips binding the body. The body has been there 4 days (which some rabbis taught 4 days was the time needed to be sure someone was dead) and Martha, ever the practical one, warns against the smell. But the stone is rolled away, we hear of no smell, and Lazarus is summoned out. Lazarus emerges alive, still wrapped up in his grave clothes. Significantly, Jesus says “Unbind him, and let him go”. In other words, set him free!

What's striking is how little fuss is made of this by John afterwards. The story moves straight on, once Lazarus emerges. We just get a note a few verses later that the authorities wanted to execute poor old Lazarus, too – as if he hadn't been through enough!

So what does John want us to take from this story, given some of the problems it raises?

First, I think he's emphasising the compassion of Jesus. It's clearly not the norm for Jesus to go around bringing people back to life. The gospels record three examples. We might debate whether they were actually dead, but these events are unusual. This is the last time Jesus will see three friends, and his compassion means he does something unusual for them. Jesus didn't cure everyone in his world, or bring everyone who had just died back to life. But in this place, and at this moment, this is how he communicated his compassion to his friends. And it meant him confronting and overcoming death in a specific instance, before he would do so comprehensively at the resurrection.

Secondly, it says something about his mission. What lies ahead of Jesus is a terrible future. All of the gospels refer to Jesus speaking of what will happen. The thought to carry him through that, must be the hope of resurrection, which he also predicts in other places. This event serves as a kind of symbol of that. I don't believe that Lazarus was a kind of pawn in a game, but Jesus must have hoped that by doing this exceptional act, he might point his friends to a hope for the future – that death need not have the final say.

Finally, (and this may sound strange) this is a resuscitation, not a resurrection. Lazarus will die again, and we don't know when that was to be. Jesus has not taken away his mortality by restoring him; he has extended his biological life. Dying is an inevitable part of being human, and this miracle doesn't do away with that. In a very sense, this miracle merely postpones what for all of us is an acute and profound issue – that of our own mortality.

Instead of taking away that mortality, what Jesus *did* come to bring us was something else – the message of resurrection. Denying the reality of death is to deny our humanity. However, what Jesus brings through his life, death and resurrection is the possibility of having the fear of death lifted from us. The raising of the Lazarus is not what opens up that possibility; it is what Jesus goes through himself.

There is something unique here in the Christian faith. We believe in a God who came in a specific contained human form, experienced all of the limitations that brings. He knew hunger, thirst, love, grief and pain from a human point of view, and then went through suffering and death and out the other side. He doesn't come to take our humanity away, with all its complexities, but to transform our experience of being human, knowing we are loved to eternity.

That doesn't answer all the questions. It doesn't stop us sometimes feeling that life has treated us badly, that it's not fair, or even questioning whether God is there at all. But it does help us not to throw everything away, and encourages us to hold on to the hope that in Jesus we don't have a temperamental wonder-worker who sometimes delivers the goods, but that in him we have something truer and deeper. That in the love he revealed, our fears can be calmed, we can know we are loved, and we can trust that for eternity.