

You'll Wake the Dead!

[Text - John 11:1-44]

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Today's reading about the raising of Lazarus, raises some challenging issues. In it, the Gospel writer lays out a detailed account of how Jesus deals with the death of his dear friend. Yet it has a certain stilted and fabricated feeling to it. Jesus speaks in lofty language about Life and Death and Resurrection. And while this is typical of the way *John* is written, it's as if the author - by trying to raise-up Jesus' Divinity - ends up making his humanity seem somewhat cold and calculating. This morning, I'd like us to look at this story from a more down-to-earth perspective. I hope this will help us better appreciate how the depth of a person's *humanity*, may be the best indicator of that person's innate *Divinity*.

When Jesus learns that his friend Lazarus is ill, he doesn't immediately go to him. John, reflecting on this years later, creates the impression that Jesus delays his journey so that Lazarus can *die*, and Jesus can then dazzle the crowd with a stunning, miraculous sign. Personally, I have an extremely hard time imagining Jesus doing this. To me, Jesus' genuine greatness doesn't lie in his ability to know the future, or to manipulate the lives and emotions of those around him. What really makes Jesus remarkable [and credible], is his willingness to consistently do the right thing, *especially* in the face of uncertainty or personal danger. This where knowing the background of this morning's story is critically important.

Lazarus is sick, and may be dying; however Bethany is only two miles from Jerusalem, where the religious authorities have just threatened Jesus' life. So *maybe* Jesus is laying low for a few days, to see what happens. I think that would be a very natural

and wise precaution, as apparently do Jesus' disciples. When Jesus finally says, "Let's go back into Judea," his disciples immediately protest: 'Now wait a minute, Jesus, they just tried to stone you to death! Are you sure you want to go back?' Jesus responds, 'Yes, I do! I will not hide in the shadow of fear, but I will walk in the *Light* of Love.' There may have been good reason to avoid going to Lazarus, but there's a far better reason *to* go: "For Jesus loved Martha and Mary and Lazarus!" And that deep love moves Jesus beyond any personal apprehension or fear.

When he arrives, Jesus finds that his friend Lazarus is already dead. When Mary and Martha hear that Jesus has finally come, Mary stays in the house. Maybe she's too upset or angry to see him just then, because of his delay. Martha, however, goes right up to him and clearly express her frustration and feelings: "Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!" Martha deeply loved her brother; and she also deeply loves Jesus. Therefore, she is not afraid to openly show her true feelings. And Jesus, who loved them both, is perfectly willing to accept her expression of anger and grief - something for you and me to remember, in our own times of anger or loss.

Genuine *love* is able to both express, and receive, genuine *feelings*. Therefore, this notion that some people have, that they must control or deny their true feelings, makes little sense. And the idea that God is some kind of controlling or demanding Being that we need to tip-toe around, is equally senseless. According to Jesus, God is a compassionate and passionate parent, who genuinely wants God's offspring to be honest about their feelings, and open about what they're thinking - One who calls us from the shadow of fear and hiding, into the light of truth and trust.

Martha freely expresses her frustration and her disappointment to Jesus; yet she also tells him that she trusts that the relationship he has with the Divine Source of Life can still make a difference.

She says, "Even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask." Jesus replies, "Your brother will rise again." She says, "I know that he will rise again, in the resurrection on the last day." Then Jesus declares, "I AM the Resurrection and the Life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live; and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die!" This is a tremendously powerful statement; but remember, it is written by John some seventy years later. And while I personally believe that this is a true statement about Jesus, I also believe that this kind of grand and lofty language probably wasn't the way in which he responds to his grieving friend at the grave-side of her brother.

I think it's far more likely that Jesus' initial response to the death of his friend, is captured in the emotional scene that's described when Mary joins them at the tomb: "When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and those who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed and *deeply moved*. He asked, 'Where have you laid him?' They answered, 'Come and see.' So Jesus went; and Jesus *wept*. They said, 'See how much he loved him!' But others said, 'Couldn't this person who opened the eyes of the blind, have kept this man from dying?' " *Perhaps* that's what Jesus himself wonders, as he weeps for his dear friend. Jesus *did* love Martha and Mary and Lazarus. He loved them with the same deep and abiding love that he felt from his own Heavenly Parent - an all-encompassing love that will not let go - a love that is *stronger* than death itself.

Now I realize, that in our scientific and analytical thinking, we may conclude that death is the ultimate end. We don't know what's beyond death, so how can we know that there's anything? However, when you and I consider all of those ancient myths and philosophies about immortality, and consider all those modern theories that string together limitless and mystifying Universes, we realize that there is far more to Life than our rational minds can even begin to grasp. And maybe, it is when Jesus stands at the

grave-side of his dear friend, that he comes to realize - and make real the truth - that death does not have the final say.

Jesus entire life, reveals that Perfect Love can reach beyond any barrier, beyond all ignorance and prejudice, beyond all doubts and fears. So why can't Perfect Love also extend beyond that ultimate fear and barrier of death? Jesus reminds us that we are all children of the Eternal Source of Life; therefore there is nothing in Life or Death that can ever separate us from that Eternal Love. This is why Jesus can say, "My Heavenly Parent, I thank you for having heard me. I know that you always hear me...." He says this, not to show off, but to show his friends - to show you and me - that we, too, can expect amazing things from our Heavenly Parent. The One who always hears us, and loves us; the One who also loves Martha and Mary and Lazarus; the One whose gracious compassion extends to every child in their time of greatest need.

So...what might all of this mean for you and me today? It means that, like Jesus, you and I can also look up, give thanks to God, and expect amazing things. It means that the same Divine Spirit that inspired Jesus, can inspire us to **do** amazing things! We can comfort those who mourn, welcome the outcast, feed the hungry, free the oppressed, and bring healing to the sick. In a way, you and I can even wake the dead! Jesus Christ calls Lazarus out of a dark and lifeless tomb, back into the light of day, where he can be unbound and set free. You and I, as the Body of Christ, can also call others back to Life. We can awaken within them the Love and Light of our Eternal Heavenly Parent. We can unbind them and set them free from the oppressive power of fear, ignorance, and condemnation. We can raise them-up with the Good News of God's compassionate welcome. And we can help one another find our way in those times of brokenness, hopelessness, or loss. We obviously can't control what happens beyond the grave. That's up to the Ultimate Source of All. In this life, however, you

and I *can* make a difference. We can choose, day by day, to walk in the light and love of our Gracious Creator. I believe that doing so, is the perfect preparation for whatever lies ahead.