

## April 10, 2011 - Fifth Sunday of Lent (A)

Readings for the Fifth Sunday of Lent (Cycle A):

1. Ezekiel 37.12-14 (I will put my spirit in you that you may live.) Psalm 130.1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8 Response: "With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption."
2. Romans 8.8-11 (The Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you.)
3. John 11.1-45 (longer form); John 11.3-7, 17, 20-27, 33b-45 (shorter form) (Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.)

### Reflections on the Sunday Gospel Reading

by Bill Hunt

Today we listen to the account of the last and greatest of Jesus' seven [\[1\]](#) signs in John's Gospel, the raising of Lazarus from the dead. "John takes what may be a true reminiscence and uses it with a theological purpose; for Lazarus, the one whom Jesus loves, is probably being held up as the representative of all those whom Jesus loves, namely the Christians . . . Just as Jesus gives life to his beloved Lazarus, so will he give life to his beloved Christians." (Brown 1966, 431)

As with the Samaritan woman and the man born blind, so also here John uses a character in the story to illustrate the progress of faith. In this case Martha is the one who advances right to the threshold of full Christian belief while the author, John the Evangelist, invites the reader to take the next step - faith in Jesus as the resurrection **and** the life.

Most commentators think that John's Gospel was written toward the end of the first century. It was sixty or seventy years since Jesus died and rose again. John's community believed that faith in Jesus brought eternal life. However, many believers had died, and each death involved a crisis of faith. "If Jesus gave us eternal life, why must we still die?" (Pilch 1995, 62) Was their hope the same as that of their fellow Israelites, notably the Pharisees, who believed in the resurrection of the dead on the final day? Or was there something more? Using Martha as a representative of the community, John leads the reader to the realization that there definitely is something more.

Jesus is the resurrection, the judge who will appear on the last day to welcome those who have believed in him as they are raised from the dead by God's power. However, he is also the **present** gift of eternal life.

The development of the story takes place in the context of first century Mediterranean culture. At that time it was commonly thought that the spirit of the dead person hovered around the body for three days. "According to T.R.W. Longstaff . . . it was a Jewish custom to watch the tomb of a loved one until the third day after death to ensure that premature burial had not taken place. (See *Semahot* 8:1.)" (Harrington 1991, 409) After that there was no hope of resuscitation. (See Brown 1966, 424 and Moloney 1998, 337.)

Note that in the two other gospel accounts where Jesus raises someone from the dead it occurs shortly after the death. In the case of Jairus' daughter, the girl had just died. (Mark 5.21-43 and parallels in Matthew and Luke) In the case of the son of the Widow of Nain, Jesus interrupted the funeral procession, which took place on the day of death. (Luke 7.11-17) By placing the incident four days after Lazarus' death, John the Evangelist is emphasizing that Lazarus was unquestionably dead.

As John tells the story, Jesus fails to respond to Martha and Mary's unspoken request when they send word that his friend Lazarus is ill. Then he compounds matters by skipping the funeral. The neighbors would have concluded that Jesus, a person with known healing powers, was dishonoring Lazarus by his delay. He misses the opportunity to heal him; he doesn't attend the funeral; and then he finally shows up too late to do any good.

This probably explains Martha's rebuke. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." She questions "whether his actions have been those of a true friend." (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998, 200) Although she expresses belief in Jesus as a healer, her faith falls far short of what John has in mind.

Two things mitigate the shaming effect of Martha's rebuke. First, she and Jesus are alone; and second, unlike Mary, she expresses her belief in Jesus' intercessory powers. "But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you." She indicates that she believes he is more than just a healer.

Later on in the story Mary rebukes Jesus with the same words, but this time in public with the Judean mourners listening and without Martha's additional words of praise. Jesus is perturbed and deeply troubled by this public challenge to his honor. When some of the Judean mourners repeat the rebuke, Jesus is indignant again at this third challenge to his honor and at their failure to progress beyond belief in him as a healer.[\[2\]](#)

After Martha's rebuke Jesus says, "Your brother will rise." Jesus is referring to the imminent raising of Lazarus from the dead. Martha understands it as Lazarus' resurrection by God's power at the end of the world.

Jesus clarifies what he means by saying: "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." (NRSV) "The dynamic life of the age to come is no longer a future expectation, but a present reality." (Brueggemann *et al.* 1995, 226)

Martha's response is a magnificent protestation of loyalty and trust in Jesus: "Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world." Note that she proclaims her faith **before** Jesus raises her brother. She believes not because she has seen a miracle, but because she has listened to the word of Jesus.

However, her response still remains on the level of belief in the resurrection on the last day. She has come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and the final judge of all, that is "the one who is coming into the world." She has not yet arrived at belief in Jesus as the present source of eternal life. This becomes clear later on when Jesus says, "Take away the stone." Instead of anticipating Lazarus' return to life, she protests that her brother has been dead for four days.

The resuscitation of Lazarus, then, is a sign of a still deeper reality - that Jesus is the source of eternal life. Jesus is the resurrection in the sense of the final judge of all. "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live." But, he is more than that; he is also the life. "Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." (See Dodd 1968, 365.)

Raymond Brown puts it this way. "Jesus is the resurrection in the sense that whoever believes in him, though he [or she] may go to the grave shall come to eternal life . . . Whoever receives the

gift of life through belief in Jesus will never die a spiritual death, for this life is eternal life."  
(Brown 1966, 434)

John Pilch agrees. "Faith in the risen Jesus is not fully developed until it enables a believer to face physical death with the firm confidence that the present possession of eternal life is not simply a pledge of resurrection on the last day but is rather a present and continuing participation in the life of the ever-living Jesus now, at this moment. Those who believe in Jesus never truly die." (Pilch 1995, 62)

None of the characters in John's story explicitly profess this full faith in Jesus. By fashioning the story in this way John is inviting us, the readers, to a deeper understanding of who Jesus is. Each of us is challenged to believe that the seeds of our future resurrection are already planted; that through faith in Jesus, the fountain of living water and the light of the world, we are already sharing in God's eternal life.

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In preparing these reflections, in addition to the biblical texts, I consulted the following works:

Brown 1966 - Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Gospel according to John (i-xii)*, Volume 29 of the Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), pp. 421-437.

Brueggemann *et al.* 1995 - Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRS, Year A*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), pp. 218-227.

Dodd 1968 - C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1968), pp. 363-368.

Fuller 1984 - Reginald H. Fuller, *Preaching the Lectionary. The Word of God for the Church Today* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1984), pp. 49-52.

Harrington 1991 - Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina Series Volume 1, A Michael Glazier Book (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), pp. 408-409.

Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998 - Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 193-203.

Moloney 1998 – Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B. *The Gospel of John*. Sacra Pagina Series Volume 4, A Michael Glazier Book (Collegeville [MN]: Liturgical Press 1998), pp. 322-348.

NRSV = Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, Editors, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible containing the Old and New Testaments*. New Revised Standard Version. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994)

Pilch 1995 - John J. Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A*. A Liturgical Press Book (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), pp. 61-63.

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[1] The seven signs in John's Gospel are generally considered to be the following: 1. turning water into wine (2.1-11); 2. the healing of the nobleman's son (4.46-54); 3. the healing of the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda (5.1-15); 4. the feeding of the five thousand (6.1-14); 5. calming the storm and walking on the sea (6.16-21); 6. the healing of the man born blind (9.1-41); and 7. the raising of Lazarus from the dead (11.1-45).

[2] For a contrary view that sees Mary's gesture of falling at Jesus' feet as leading to a genuine profession of faith, see Moloney 1998, 329-330.