

LIVING IN THE HEART: TRANSFORMATION

John 11: 17-27, 38-44

A man named John went on a vacation to the Middle East with most of his family, including his mother-in-law. During their vacation and while they were visiting Jerusalem, John's mother-in-law died. With death certificate in hand, John went to the American Consulate to make arrangements to send the body back to the States for proper burial. The Consul told John that sending a body back to the States for burial is very, very expensive. It could cost as much as \$5,000. He told John that in most cases the persons responsible for the remains of their loved ones decide to bury the body in Jerusalem, which would only cost \$150. John thought for some time and answered, "I don't care how much it will cost to send the body back; that's what I want to do." The Consul, after hearing John's reply, said, "You must have loved your mother-in-law very much, considering the difference in price." "No, it's not that," says John. "You see, I know of a case many years ago of a person buried here in Jerusalem. On the third day he arose from the dead. I just can't take that chance."

Have you thought about what happens after death? When someone you love dies, where do you imagine them going? Is there life after death? If there is, then why are we so afraid of death? Our Bible story today sheds some light on this question of life after death. The story of raising Lazarus from the dead is the last of seven signs or miracles in the Gospel of John. It is definitely the most amazing one of all of them. There was one miracle of raising someone from the dead, the son of the royal official but this one is much bigger. The son had just died, but Lazarus had been dead for four days already. This shows that it wasn't just a case of resuscitation. This is the last miracle before Jesus' own death and resurrection.

Therefore, the high point of this Gospel is the great pronouncement of verses 25-26: "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 serves the same function as "I am the light of the world" in the healing of the blind man in chapter 9. It is about the identity of Jesus as the life of the world. The readers of the Gospel of John experienced a great crisis of faith when any believer died. If Jesus gave us eternal life, why must we still die? Martha represents the community with its real but inadequate faith: "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." If only Jesus had not left at his ascension, he would still be with the community and believers wouldn't die. After all, whatever Jesus asks of God will be given, won't it? The Gospel helps correct this misunderstanding. He is indeed "the resurrection and the life" (v. 24). But resurrection does not mean the restoration of life to a physical body; it means rather a transformation of life. The eternal life that Jesus gives his followers does not abolish death but rather transcends it. To continue to believe this firmly is the challenge posed to the survivors by each believer's death. Faith in the risen Jesus is not fully developed until a believer faces physical death with the confidence that eternal life is not only about resurrection on the last day but is also about life beyond the grave here and now. Those who believe in Jesus never truly die.

As scientifically minded Western believers what we are invited to recognize in the story of Lazarus is that Martha pronounces her confession of faith as a response to Jesus revealing himself as the resurrection and the life. Her faith does not depend upon or flow from seeing her brother raised from the dead. Proof gives us knowledge; faith does not rest on proof. The insights of our pre-scientific Mediterranean ancestors in the faith are like Hamlet's humbling comment: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy [or science]" (*Hamlet*, act 1, scene 6, line 167). Years ago, there was a little known play by Eugene O'Neill entitled "Lazarus Laughed." It was not a commercial success. In fact, it closed just a week after it opened on Broadway. However, in it O'Neill really shows the importance of the story of Lazarus. The play begins, or picks up, where the Biblical story leaves off. Lazarus was the friend that Jesus called back from the dead. After the grave clothes are taken off of him he begins to laugh a gentle, soft laugh; nothing bitter, nothing derisive, an embracing, astonishing, welcoming sound. The very first thing he does is to embrace Jesus with gratitude. Then he begins to embrace his sisters and the other people who were gathered there. He has a very clear look in his eye, nothing far away. It's as if he's seeing the world about him for the very first time. He reaches over and pats the earth very affectionately. He looks up at the sky, at the trees, at the neighbors as if he had never seen them before, as if he is overwhelmed by the incredible alrightness of the way everything is. The very first words he utters are the words, "Yes, yes, yes," as if to embrace reality as it is being discovered all over again. In the play he makes his way back to his house and the whole village of

Bethany is awash with wonder. Finally somebody gets the courage to ask what was on everybody's mind. "Lazarus, tell us what it's like to die. What lies on the other side of this boundary that none of us have crossed?" At that point, Lazarus begins to laugh even more intensely and then he says, "There is no death, really. There is only life. There is only God. There is only incredible joy." He continues, "Death is not the way it appears from this side. Death is not an abyss into which we go into chaos. It is, rather, a portal through which we move into everlasting growth and everlasting life." He then says, "The One that meets us there is the same generosity that gave us our lives in the beginning, the One who gave us our birth. Not because we deserved it but because that generous One wanted us to be and therefore there is nothing to fear in the next realm. The grave is as empty as a doorway is empty. It is a portal through which we move into greater and finer life. Therefore, there is nothing to fear. Our great agenda is to learn to accept, to learn to trust. We are put here to learn to love more fully. There is only life. There is no death." And with that his laughter began to fill the whole house in which he was staying. Jesus as the resurrection and life is not about the restoration of life to our physical body; it is about a transformation of life now and always. We are not shielded from pain and suffering. We are transformed in the midst of our pain. We want to be protected from all that hurts us. We want God to be the big mother bear who stops anything that might get in the way of our happiness. We, like the early Christians, tend to see in the story of raising Lazarus from the dead that God is going to us bail out of all that harms us. We tend to forget that the message of the story is that of transformation of life. Transformation is not God's work to make you superhuman and never die. Transformation is the work of the Spirit to help you become who you are truly created to be: a child of God who knows that life is about the presence of God and with that there are no limitations of any kind. This does not mean that it is not painful to lose someone you love. Jesus himself wept in the story and was greatly disturbed when he heard about his friend's death. Yet, we can at the same time know that there is nothing but life because Christ is the resurrection and life. Living in the heart is about knowing that we are always in the presence of God and that life is on this side and beyond!

In one of his books, Henri Nouwen tells the story about twins, a sister and brother were talking to each other in the womb. The little sister said to the little brother: 'I believe that there is life after birth!' Her brother protested: 'No, no, this is all there is. This is a dark and cozy place, and we have nothing else to do but to cling on to the cord that feeds us.' But the little girl insisted: 'There must be something more than this dark place, there must be something else where there is light and freedom to move.' Still she could not convince her twin brother. Then...after some silence, she said hesitantly: 'I have something else to say, and I am afraid you won't believe that either, but I think there is a mother!' Her little brother now became furious: 'A mother, a mother, what are you talking about? I have never seen a mother and neither have you. Who put that idea in your head? As I told you, this place is all we have so let's be content.' The little sister finally said: 'Don't you feel this pressure sometimes? It is really unpleasant and sometimes even painful.' 'Yes,' he answered, 'what's special about that?' 'Well,' the sister said, 'I think this pressure is there to get us ready for another place, much more beautiful than this, where we will see our mother face to face! Don't you think that's exciting!