

I want to speak to you this morning about our gospel passage popularly known as the raising of Lazarus. Let me begin by saying that I believe this is one of the most profound passages in Christian scripture, and let me also say I don't believe for a moment that it actually happened. Firstly, I am going to report the evidence against its literal happening, and then I am going to tell you why I think it is among the truest stories in the bible.

John the gospel writer was a mystic. Mystics do not tell literal stories. They aren't about telling this happened and then that happened and it was also followed by.... Mystics tell stories to illustrate theological or spiritual or moral principles that are designed to provoke contemplation, reflection, prayer, and focused awareness. Mystics are not so much about what and where and when as they are about telling stories that can be with you for life, continually revealing as your own growth and development becomes more attuned to the insights available. The late John Shelby Spong the one-time highly controversial Bishop of Newark, New Jersey wrote in the heading for his review of the Gospel of John: *Not a literal book*. I should say that I find Spong's work very helpful in coming to greater understanding of scripture.

Before I go on to tell you why I believe the Lazarus story did not literally happen, let me give you an example of a powerful belief that was occasioned by a story that decidedly never happened. In the 6th century before the common era, a Greek slave told a story about a tortoise and a hare running a race refereed by a fox. 27 centuries later I don't really need to tell you that that slave's name was Aesop. Nor do I need to tell you that the tortoise won. You know perfectly well that the moral of the story is *The race is not always to the swift*. Aesop told a charming story that could be followed by an infant or a brain surgeon to illustrate a lasting truth. So to with the Gospel of John. Its authors were not writing history; they were writing about truth in a way that could reach a wide range of people over a great range of time. Many of us first knew the story of Lazarus in Sunday school. We encounter it today decades later in a way that continues to provide us with revelation. As Saint Paul said in 1 Corinths, *When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways*. We are continually invited to put an end to childish ways as we encounter Holy Scripture. Just as you don't have to believe that the fox actually

refereed a real race between a tortoise and a hare. Whether Lazarus was actually raised is irrelevant to the power of the story.

Please remember that the Gospel of John was the last of the Gospels to be written, possibly as late as the first or second decade of the 2ndst century or even into the third. The three Synoptic Gospels were written well before John's. Not only that, all of Paul's letters were written before any of the Gospels and most of the rest of the letters were certainly written before John's Gospel. Yet in all three other gospels and in the letters there is no mention of Lazarus being raised from the dead. In John's account, the raising is not a discrete, private affair. Both Mary and Martha were there together with what is described as many of the Jews from Jerusalem there to console the sisters. So this very public, miraculous, and much witnessed event is not mentioned in any other book in the Christian Scriptures. Secondly John's story is the only mention of Mary and Martha having a brother. He appears only in this morning's passage and just once again at the beginning of the next chapter at dinner. On the other hand Mary and Martha are mentioned in Luke 10: 38 – 42: *Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at Jesus's feet....* There is no mention of a brother, leave alone one whom Jesus raised from the dead. Surely if the raising of Lazarus after 4 days in the tomb had actually happened, some written record would survive from the at least 70 years from the Crucifixion to John's writing his Gospel. Finally on the subject of did it happen, if as John suggests shortly after our reading the raising of Lazarus was pivotal in the decision of the Chief Priest to have Jesus condemned to death, surely it would have been noted in some written historical source like Josephus in his *Jewish Antiquities* in which Josephus does recount the crucifixion of Jesus at the order of Pilate. To be sure there is a Lazarus in Luke, but he is the poor man begging at the rich man's gate – no brother to Mary and Martha. Let me be clear, I am not saying that Jesus couldn't have raised Lazarus from the dead. I am merely saying that it is highly unlikely, given all the reasons I have just given. But here's the important part, it doesn't matter a bit. The power of the story is not dependent on its literal happening. Its power is in what it promises and what it says about our relationship with God.

Before I go into the true power of the story there is a line, I want to be sure you understand. I like it best from the King James Version, verse 39: *Jesus said, Take ye*

away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days. The significance is in the phrase *four days*. 1st century Jews, especially Pharisees, believed that the soul hovered near the body for three days almost as though the first three days of death were tentative, capable of being reversed. Some one dead for four days was truly dead. The death and the rising of Lazarus is often seen as a foretelling of Jesus' death and resurrection; it is very significant that Jesus rose on the third day. But more significant than the days in the tomb is the manner of leaving it of which I shall speak shortly

Now to really understand the Lazarus story it is important to understand the structure of John's Gospel. It is built around seven signs. Here they are in order of appearance.

1. Turning Water into Wine (John 2:1–11): Jesus acts as Lord of nature, changing water into wine at Cana.
2. Healing the Nobleman's Son (John 4:46–54): Jesus shows his authority over life by healing from a distance.
3. Healing the Lame Man at Bethseda (John 5:1–15): Jesus acts as the restorer of lost powers on the Sabbath.
4. Feeding the 5,000 (John 6:5–14): Jesus proves Himself as the bread of life capable of sustaining believers.
5. Walking on Water (John 6:16–21): Jesus demonstrates dominion over nature and guidance to his disciples.
6. Healing the Man Born Blind (John 9:1–7): Jesus reveals Himself as the light of the world, curing blindness.
7. And finally we come back to raising Lazarus from the Dead (John 11:1–44): The climax of the signs, showing Jesus as the resurrection and the life.

Of these 7, only walking on water occurs in Matthew and Mark and feeding the 5000 occurs in all four gospels. The remaining five signs, are unique to the Gospel of John. These signs are critical to what many scholars believe are the last words in the Gospel of John in Chapter 20 - You may want to remind me that John has 21 Chapters, but the last chapter is presumed by many to have been added later, perhaps by a disciple of John's. *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

So why are there seven signs? Well clearly, seven points to the completion of creation: in six days God made the earth and on the seventh he rested. But seven also refers to many other things in ancient cultures and in the Bible: days in the week, the number of continents, 7 colours in a rainbow, 7 petitions in the Lord's Prayer. In addition 7 is a prime number indivisible by any other number. Those who first heard or read John's Gospel would not have missed that 7 meant completeness.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is a parable the meaning of which is made clear in the last five verses: *So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.*

You will note the connection in this passage with the last words from Chapter 20: through believing you may have life in his name. *Unbind him and let him go* is perhaps the most important line in the whole story of Lazarus for two reasons. Firstly, John uses the Lazarus story as a symbol of all who find God in Jesus and become unbound from their religious or non-religious pasts to a whole new level of consciousness and belief and life in Jesus. Secondly while the story of Lazarus is often seen as a foretelling of what is to happen to Jesus, that connection is in danger of missing a very important difference. Lazarus stumbles out of the tomb encumbered by his grave clothes. When John tells of the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb, Peter and the beloved disciple go into the tomb they *saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus's head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.* Lazarus was resuscitated or restored to life – a life that would go on for some time but in the end would meet death yet again. Resuscitation is a return to what was. Resurrection is a transformation to a whole different order of existence. Jesus the Christ was resurrected to an existence which was, for the Christ, a return to the Father whence he came as is clearly described in the prologue to John's Gospel. A return to the Father but in no way an abandonment of those who believe in him nor of those who one day may come to believe in him.

I said that I would explain why I thought the story of Lazarus to be among the truest stories in the Christian scriptures. *Unbind him and let him go.* To believe in Jesus is to

be unbound and to be set free. Think of all that can bind us – burdens, misconceptions, anxieties, fears, and meaninglessness. Think of all the false Gods by whom we can become ensnared – money, power, possessions, sex, status. We don't lose these things when we believe In Jesus, but they no longer exercise the same dangerous power over us. They can even become healthful. If we believe in Jesus, and we have money we know what to do with it. If we have power, we can follow Micah and do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. If we have possessions, we can avoid being owned by them. If we have sex, we know to share it as gift not as an obsession nor as a means of dominance, cruelty or exploitation. And, if we have status, we only need to think of Joseph sold into slavery, Ruth the foreign widow, David the youngest son, the widow and her mite to know that the lowest shall come first.

But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. Amen.