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Dying Into Life

John 11: 1 – 12: 11

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Our society expends an enormous amount of time, energy and money fighting death. Maybe we don't really believe the two inevitabilities – death and taxes – or that the psychologists of 50 years ago were right when they said that the fear of dying compels most of human activity. If we look at our public and private expenditures for health care, social security, Medicare and the enormous need for assisted living, it's clear that we want to go on living for a long, long time.

Which is not such a bad thing; I like living. And I like health care that fixes shoulders and other things that ail us. But I think it says something about us as a people when we spend so much of our time making money to pay medical bills, exercise, donate to groups to fight cancer and MS, make it mandatory to wear a seat belts and bicycle helmets. All of that and more, shouts out that we want to put off dying, as long as we can, if not forever.

Mary and Martha were just like us. Their brother Lazarus was sick, deathly ill, and they sent for Jesus, presumably to come to Bethany to heal him. But when he didn't, when he spent a couple of days just hanging out where he was, they had pretty harsh words for him. I'll bet we'd have harsh words, too: "Where were you God when my husband/child/friend, was so sick? C'mon, God, you could've healed them. You're the Great Physician. Don't you care? Where were you?"

Good questions, especially because they rise up from deep inside of us, where our soul is seeking to touch the Sacred when it can't understand the emptiness when God just doesn't seem to be with us. And Jesus' answer to the initial request to come to Lazarus' side probably doesn't help much; he had a different agenda: "This illness is not unto death," he replies to the desperate plea. "It is for God's glory so that the Son of Man might be glorified." And so, as the story says, Jesus waited for two long days, despite his love for this family, before he made it to Bethany.

Lazarus was dead; four days in a cold, rock tomb. Mary and Martha come to Jesus in various states of affection, agitation and grief. They're glad he's there but wish he would've come sooner. And then the story proceeds much like a conventional miracle story, the sort that healers of many peoples and religions have always done, not unlike some prophets of the Old Testament. He goes to the tomb, calls out the dead

man, orders that the crowd take off the grave clothes and restores him to family and community.

I don't know if this story actually happened this way, but I know this story is true because, though dying is hard, it is the only way to life. What I'm talking about is not our bodies dying, the sometimes long, sometimes not so long and sometimes sudden passing away of this mortal flesh of ours. That's hard enough; in particular, it's hard for those of us left behind at the loss of one we've known and loved. This story, however, is not really about that kind of dying. The dying I'm talking about is something I think this story is really urging us to enter into: to come alive to what is being born in your soul, you have to die to what has been.

Of course, in a society that puts so much emphasis on not dying, even this this is hard to get our minds around. We'd rather hang on to whatever it is that has been of great value or comfort to us along the way. And so, Martha says to Jesus: "Lord, I know that my brother will rise in the resurrection on the last day. . . . Yes," she seems to be saying, "this is what we've always been taught, Jesus; that someday, in the future, someplace outside of this earthly existence we'll rise to new life." And so, Mary and Martha and the mourning party cling to the belief that resurrection life only begins after we take our last breath, at the end of our time or the end of all time. They settle for what they have, cling to beliefs passed down to them by their parents and grandparents, whether or not they have any real experience of them. Better cling to the old tried and true, life-giving or not, than open your soul to something radically new; you never know where that something might take you.

Not an ancient issue, to be sure. The poet, W.H. Auden summed up our situation well:

"We would rather be ruined than changed.
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the present
And let our illusions die."

It's not easy dying to the old and being born again. It's a lot easier to just accept whatever you were handed down from family, friends, the church, some spiritual guru or the "Four Steps to Salvation," and say, "Yeah. I've got it," while all the while you're not experiencing a thing, not recognizing that constant pull on your soul that may be radically different than what somebody or somebodies outside of you is telling you is the truth. But that's not coming alive to that Power within you. That's like rich young man who walked away from Jesus in poverty of spirit, even if he did and believed everything he'd been taught from his days in Sunday school. He followed the money rather than his experience, rather than his encounter with Jesus himself.

Isn't this story calling us to "climb the cross of the present," "let the illusions die," and know life, real life, inside? When we went to Israel 8 ½ years ago, we stopped in Bethany and went to the "official" tomb of Lazarus. Of course, no one really knows if this was the one connected to the story, but it most certainly was a first century tomb.

There was a somewhat small opening and narrow passage taking you down into a round opening where the bodies were placed. It was warm, maybe even stuffy, and had there been no electric light, it would have been a place of very deep darkness. As I was reading the story this week, I thought about that place and it came to me: the tomb of Lazarus was a second kind of womb. Deep inside, in that dark, quiet place, he was being transformed. Not unlike Jonah in the belly of the great fish three days and three night, Lazarus was being made new; he would not and could not be the same, ever again. He was waiting to come alive. And what it took for him to come fully alive was the call of Jesus.

“Martha, Mary: I am the Resurrection and the Life – now. Can’t you see? You can have new life, right now. Die to everything that keeps you captive. Step into the tomb, and listen for my voice.”

And Jesus walks to the tomb amidst the mourners and disheartened, those who couldn’t see any other way and those who saw only death, and he wept. He wept for . . . we don’t know, but maybe he was weeping for those who clung to their illusions or those who couldn’t see any other way of being or for those for whom death is the last word, the only word. Or maybe, he wept out of love. For whatever reason, he wept, and then after the stone had been rolled away, he called out: “Lazarus! Come out!”

Can you hear the silence? The gasp? The sun rising in the east? The song of a bird?

And crawling out of that womb/tomb comes one who was dead and is now alive. But he’s not the same as he was four days ago, or four years ago. He’s new, brand new; radically different. His illusions are gone. Now, Lazarus doesn’t just know about the Spirit the living God. Now, new life isn’t just something he’s heard about or learned about in Sunday school. Now, he knows; he knows, deep in his soul. He has experienced the transforming power of the living God.

And you? Have you ever gone into that tomb to let your illusions die? Ever hear the voice of Jesus?

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12: 24)

O, but the story’s not over. You see, Lazarus’ transformation isn’t complete; not yet. He crawls out of that tomb wrapped in his burial cloths, the garments that bound him to his old life. The old life is still clinging to him, maybe even pulling him back into that tomb. And so, Jesus says to those gathered, “Unbind him and let him go.”

Lazarus couldn’t fully begin his new life without the help of others. You see, there’s no such thing as a “lone ranger Christian” or spirituality, that is so prevalent today in both church and the multitude of spiritual practices. There’s no such thing because it’s so easy to slip back into the tomb of thinking that, “If I just learn the right things and believe the right things, read the right book, listen to the right preacher, and practice prayer just like so and so says, everything will be just wonderful for me, after I die.” You need others to take away those tempting grave cloths of conformity, which is the easy way of doing things. Do things just like they’ve always been done; follow the crowd and do what society expects out of you. Do that and you crawl back into the

Waste Land of deadened spirituality and your soul shrinks. You need a community to free you from what binds you to the old life and open yourself to whatever God is doing to your soul, whatever God is giving you to be made new, transformed, right now. For when this happens, you come alive! You come alive to what is most real and most true inside, what sets your heart on fire, what burns in your belly. And when you come alive, the world will never be the same.

O, this is what the world needs so desperately today – people who have come alive to what burns in the soul, because what the Spirit is firing inside you is what the world longs for, whether it knows it or not.

All that is well and good, but I can't end this without issuing a warning: Not everyone wants people come alive. The leaders of the society of the day, the Pharisees, the elites, the Roman rulers, like it when people are dead. We don't have to be in a tomb. In fact, it's better if we're not. All they care about is that there's no zest, no vitality; just follow along, do what you're supposed to do and never upset the apple cart. Who cares about those deep yearnings in your soul; get with the program, that's what matters. People who come alive are too disruptive to the status quo; they make waves; they truly see that the way it is, is not the way of the kingdom of God, not the way that leads to new, full life. And so, the religious leaders look for a way to kill not only Jesus, but Lazarus, too. They need to put him back in his place – keep him dead and buried. He's too dangerous because he's alive; he's been transformed by his dying and the summons of Jesus to come out of that tomb and live – live! – the abundant life promised to those who follow the deepest urgings of the soul.

What about you? Whose voice will you follow?

The summons is there. So, go ahead, go into the tomb, that second womb. Die to the deadness of conformity and pay attention to the stirrings of your soul, to that Voice that's inside you and out, the Voice that calls you out of yourself into the service of Something greater than yourself. Go ahead, "let the dead bury their own dead;" you follow the One who gives life, blessed life.