

Lent 5
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45

Collide

Jesus said, "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.

There are few, if any, stories in the Gospels, in which Jesus' human and divine natures seem to almost collide against each other as this one from today's Gospel of John. Lazarus, along with his sisters Mary and Martha, have been among Jesus' closest friends, the people he went to when he needed to unwind, to get away.

And yet upon hearing that Lazarus is near death, Jesus delayed his trip to their home for two days, proclaiming that what would eventually happen would be to the glory of God. Through his connectedness and trust in God, Jesus believed to the very core of his being that this was indeed the case, and that belief gave him confidence in his decision to remain where he was.

And yet, upon his arrival, hearing that Lazarus was dead, and confronted with the very real grief of Mary and Martha, along with the taunting of some in the crowd who had come to comfort the sisters, John

tells us that Jesus became “greatly disturbed,” and suffered very real emotions by what is going on around him. He wept, perhaps as the reality of his friend’s death came fully upon him. Theologian Frederick Buechner notes, it is the only time in the whole of the New Testament that Jesus breaks down himself.ⁱ

In this the fifth and final week of Lent, we are given the story of Lazarus not only as a foreshadowing of what will very soon happen to Jesus, his own death and resurrection, but also as a reminder of what a life of faith entails. For while the immediate story of Lazarus has a happy ending, it points to a very real dilemma that not just Jesus faced, but that we all do as well. And that is reconciling our own sense of ourselves, as people saved by the grace and love of God, given eternal life, but who also live very real human lives, full of happiness and joy, as well as questions, sorrows, doubts and uncertainty.

As a person of faith, I know that Jesus is always with me, loving me and guiding me. But as a human being, there are also times when I just want things to stop hurting, to get easier, or better yet, to just go away. That even with trusting in God’s providence, life can feel overwhelming.

And as we see from today's Gospel, this reconciliation was something even Jesus found difficult at times.

But difficult is not the same thing as impossible or undoable.

The season of Lent is a time when we are perhaps more aware of the need for this kind of reconciliation and the difficulties it can present. For as a season of penitence, it asks us to look at not just our shortcomings, something most of us have no trouble doing whether it is Lent or not, but more importantly, our absolute need to rely upon God in order to deal with not just them, but with the hardships in our lives as well.

And from there, to ask the difficult question—what is it that keeps us from doing that, from relying on God whose offer to be with us, to love and help us is so freely given.

The answers to this question are often complicated. For they can expose deep fears or suspicions—of not being worthy of God's attention, of being disappointed, that God somehow won't come through. And what may be the hardest one for us to face, is of God not giving us the answer we want to hear, that we won't get our way.

For years, I had hoped to have a child but the circumstances of my life never seemed to be quite right, I didn't want to be a single parent. And

my prayers reflected this—I prayed that I would meet the right person to share my life with so that we could have a child.

But then after meeting that person, I learned I had to have a hysterectomy.

I remember being in the pre-op area of the hospital on the day of my surgery. It felt like one of those moments when my faith was colliding with what I was feeling. I was in a complete state of despair and God and I were having some words, interrupted from time to time by this incredibly perky young woman a couple of beds down from me who seemed to know everyone there.

It turned out she was a nurse in that hospital and many of the doctors and nurses knew her and were coming over to say hello and to talk. It also turned out that she was in there because they were going to be doing a biopsy on a lump found in her breast and that she had already once before been treated for breast cancer, so this was quite serious.

And as soon as I found that out, it was like a veil was lifted from my soul and the despair vanished. It certainly put my situation into perspective because I realized that ultimately I was going to be alright. And with that

realization, my prayers stopped being for me but for this brave young woman.

In the years since then, I often think back to that moment and how it changed my life. I still feel moments of sadness for not having had a child, but on the other hand, I certainly have plenty of children in my life, including my beautiful stepdaughter Abby who I have known ever since she was a toddler. And while I didn't get the answer or the result I had wanted from my prayers for a child, I learned firsthand something very fundamental about the faithfulness of God and the extraordinary revelation given us in Jesus.

And that is, life is full of resurrections, some big, rising from the grave big, but most of them occurring on a considerably smaller scale. But in order to have a resurrection, there must first be if not loss or death, which is often the case, then at least a letting go. Facing any of these things is usually not easy, but by the grace of God, we don't face them alone.

For as Jesus called upon his heavenly Father to make what would seem to be impossible, possible, we too can call upon him, to see us through, to give us the strength, ability and wisdom to do what needs to be done. To help us reach beyond our human understanding and vision and in

the process, find something new and unexpected. Every resurrection experience helps us to see Jesus just a little clearer and realize what a loving, life-giving embrace we are held and beheld in.

In reflecting upon the story of Lazarus, Frederick Buechner writes:

Recent interviews with people who have been resuscitated after being pronounced clinically dead reveal that after the glimpse they evidently . . . get of a figure of light waiting for them on the other side, they are very reluctant to be brought back again to this one. On the other hand, when Lazarus opened his eyes to see the figure of Jesus standing there in the daylight beside him, he couldn't for the life of him tell which side he was on.ⁱⁱ

Out of a love so deep to be almost incomprehensible, Jesus gave everything he had, even his life, in the hope and promise of resurrection, so that we too can always behold his face. As we move on to Holy Week, it is good that we remember that, the lengths he went to in order to assure us that he would be with us always, no matter what life may bring. And not just in this life but also in the one to come.

The Rev. Canon Allisyn Thomas
9 March 2008

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures, A Biblical Who's Who* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1979), p. 102.

ⁱⁱ Buechner, p. 103.