

We have reached the turning point in John's Gospel. John was very intentional about how he wrote his version of the Good News: Bookended by a prologue and epilogue, the stories of Jesus' ministry of teaching and healing (in chapters 1-10) form the first half, what literary folk might call the rising action. The stories of Jesus' last days, his death and resurrection (as told in chapters 12-20) form the second half, the dénouement. Sandwiched in the middle are the Bethany episodes.

Chapter 11 and the first part of 12 recount the events that happened in Bethany with Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. You may recall that the ladies sent word to Jesus to come quickly as their brother was ill and near death, and Jesus took his sweet time to respond. When he finally shows up, Lazarus had been dead four days and his sisters are bereft. Jesus, weeps after being greatly disturbed in spirit at the news of the death of his friend, but then he hikes up his holy britches and heads to the tomb and calls Lazarus to come out. And he does! Lazarus hops up and walks himself right out of that cave, bandages and all.

Martha and Mary, are quite pleased. I assume Lazarus is, too. However, the Pharisees and chief priests are not. Jesus has been on their radar for some time – he's a threat to their power, to their place in the social and economic hierarchy. And this is the last straw for them: we are told that “they plan to put him to death.”¹

That's where our story from this morning picks up. As you heard, Jesus arrives back in Bethany for a dinner party his friends are throwing in his honor. Martha is busy cooking the meal, and Mary bathes Jesus' feet with costly perfume and wipes his feet with her hair. Jesus recognizes that Mary is performing a burial ritual foreshadowing his quickly approaching death.

This narrative of events in Bethany is a key passage in John's Gospel, and is the lens through which we can make sense of the first 10 chapters, and serves to foreshadow what will take place in the next 9.

Of course we see with our post-resurrection perspective that Jesus' life, teachings, ministry, and miracles were all pointing his followers toward life with God. They

¹ John 11:53

point us toward relationship with God not only in the here and now, but throughout time eternal. John's audience might not yet have that bigger picture.

So it is that our passage we read from this morning is full of juxtaposition and nuance to point them, and us, toward death (Jesus' death, Lazarus' death, perhaps even our own death) ... which we also know leads us to life.

For example, the last time Jesus was in Bethany, he was at the tomb where Lazarus, who had been dead four full days, had been buried. Martha warned Jesus before he even headed to the tomb that the smell would be terrible. But Jesus didn't care; he boldly walked up to the cave entrance, had the stone removed, and ordered Lazarus to come out. And out he came.

Here Jesus and his disciples are a while later, as we read this morning, back in Bethany, arriving not to news of the death of a loved one, but by invitation to a party! Martha has busied herself preparing and serving a meal, and Mary is extravagantly pouring so much perfume on Jesus' feet that John remarks that the entire house was filled with its fragrance. Gone is the stench of death, and in its place is the scent of earthly extravagance and life.

At Lazarus' death, Jesus responded to Martha and Mary's pleas with a love that went far beyond his human capabilities. Jesus resuscitated their brother and brought him back to life. Likewise, Jesus responded to their desire to extravagantly show their gratitude at this party they throw him by welcoming their sacrificial offerings of time, energy, and limited resources. Jesus knows the value of accepting and honoring their extravagance as a display of their love for and devotion to him.

I would add that no longer are Martha and Mary grieving over the death of one of their most important people, but they're also no longer worrying about how to fend for themselves in a male-dominated society – how to get money for food and where they are to live (since presumably the house in which they lived belonged to their brother) – but rather so relishing the earthly securities of hearth and home and family and togetherness that they are throwing a party to celebrate. They are grateful to Jesus for this new life for their brother as well as for themselves, and therefore celebrating their regained security and physical well-being.

Mary, Martha and Lazarus are keenly aware of the tenuousness of life. When times were hard ~ nearly unbearable, even ~ Jesus was their go-to. And when times were good ~ too good to be believed ~ Jesus was their go-to. In the words of

this morning's collect, among the swift and varied changes of the world, their hearts were [resolutely] fixed where true joys are to be found.²

Mary recognizes that the end is near for her dear friend Jesus. Jesus is so dear to her that he is family. He is one of her friends, a man she cares for deeply; he is her Lord. Again she falls at his feet. This time, not bathing them in tears of despair, but in costly perfume purchased for his burial rite and her eyes are dry. She anoints his feet as she would, perhaps as she did, her beloved brother at his death.

She crosses the social and cultural barriers to perform this ritual of affection and preparation and goodbye because she recognizes that the end of Jesus' earthly life is near. She gives him permission to continue his journey, even if the destination demands his death. Because she knows that death is not forever. And so she celebrates Jesus' life even in the looming shadow of his death.

I'm asked almost routinely what happens to us after we die. It's a question I'm asked by little kids who are trying to make sense of the death of a beloved pet, by young would-be parents who grieve the abrupt end of a pregnancy, by those who bravely face the indignities of illness or ageing. What comes next?

I must confess that one thing that gets me every time I read this passage is that we never hear from Lazarus. If anyone would have something substantive to say on the subject of death, surely it would be Lazarus. Problem is, he's completely silent in the Scriptures. We don't have any record of anything Lazarus said before or after his first death ~ or second, for that matter. Not one word is recorded about his reaction to being resuscitated. Presumably, he's happy he's alive again as he's likely the one who is paying the bill for this little shindig ... as well as Mary's perfume. Not one description about seeing a bright light, or hearing the voice of his mother, or a feeling as though he was floating above his body. We don't hear if he felt welcomed into a warm embrace, or if he simply felt nothing at all. (How different this Gospel would be if our Gospel writer had taken a contemporary course in investigative journalism!)

There's not one word about how Lazarus feels about being called back from wherever (or whatever) was beyond death. How does this death-to-life experience affect his feelings about dying all over again at some point in the future? Was he afraid of death the first time? How does he feel about dying a second time?

² Collect for the Day, Lent 5

Despite Lazarus' silence on the topic of what happens after death, I can't help but wonder if maybe in this pivotal story, we get a glimpse of what the afterlife might be like. After all, John wrote his Gospel on many levels, from the literal to the allegorical. Perhaps the afterlife is like coming home to those who are your most beloved, or like being invited to a banquet where you are the guest of honor. Maybe it's like spending the day relaxing and hanging out while all your worldly cares are met, or like toiling away at a task for the benefit of those you care most deeply for. Perhaps the afterlife is like extravagant displays of affection and devotion from the people you love the most, or like gifts that are both given and received with enthusiasm and deep, abiding love. In addition to all that, I have a hunch that the afterlife is like a place where illness, death and goodbyes have no lasting hold; like the joy of the current moment is indistinguishable from the ecstasy of the eternal.

For our Gospel writer, this is the pivotal moment when the followers of Jesus, the cynics and the curious gather to see living proof that death has no hold on the faithful; life after death is no longer a theoretical possibility, but may actually be a reality as evidenced in Lazarus' experience.

Heading into the final stretch of Lent, we too find ourselves at a pivotal moment in our journey to Christ's cross. You, too, may be asking what happens to us when we die? What comes next? I have no idea, exactly. None of us do. But after Lazarus died, he rose again, was restored to fullness of life and health and relationship. The pain and heartache of his goodbyes were transformed into joy-filled greetings. He had a party. He enjoyed a great meal, and spent precious time with the people he loved the most. The literal and metaphorical stench of his own death was transformed to the fragrance of the costliest perfume. Seems pretty heavenly.

I don't know what comes next, but I do know that when our bodies are broken and we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God is with us. There is still plenty to celebrate, there is still much to be grateful for. And as we joyfully proclaim week after week, we know that it is very meet, right, and our bounden duty, that we should at all time and in all places, give thanks to our Lord, holy Father, almighty, everlasting God ~ because even when we breathe our last, life is changed, not ended.