

Jesus Raises Lazarus

Please read the whole of John chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 12 in order to capture the full meaning of this sign and the transition to the final days of Jesus before the crucifixion.

This is the last of the signs in the Gospel of John and another transitional story to introduce the final days of Jesus before he was crucified. We have not referred to them as miracles because the word sign seems to be more appropriate for a more comprehensive meaning, especially in the Gospel of John. A sign, like a signature on documents today, is the traditional way of demonstrating one's credentials as to who they are or whom they represent. In the Hebrew scriptures a sign was often seen as a divine mark of credibility. An even greater reason may be given by Fr. Brown, *"In John the reference to spiritual deliverance is primary, and the symbolic element is stronger. And, as we have said, this primary emphasis on the symbolic possibilities of the miracle differentiates John from the Synoptics."* Examples: *"If Jesus restores the blind man's sight, the interchange that follows (ix 35-41) shows that Jesus has given him spiritual sight and reduced the Pharisees to spiritual blindness. If Jesus gives life to Lazarus, the remarks of Jesus (xi 24-26) show that the restoration of physical life is important only as a sign of the gift of eternal life."* The Gospel according to John I-XII Introduction and Commentary, by Raymond E. Brown, pg. 529 Appendix III, Doubleday & Company, Inc., New York

It is clear that the author of the Gospel of John is writing to call us to a spiritual life-changing transformation as noted at the close of chapter 21: 30-31: *"There were indeed many other signs that Jesus performed in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. Those written here have been recorded in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this faith you may have life by his name"*. A life in all the fullness that is meant for a citizen in the Realm of God.

The raising of Lazarus from the dead was not the first time that Jesus did this. Note that Jesus also raised from the dead, Jairus' daughter (Matthew 9:18-26; Mark 5:41-42; Luke 8:52-56) and a widow's son (Luke 7:11-15). Indeed, there were others in scripture whom we are told were able to raise people from the dead. They too demonstrated this sign to substantiate their divine mark of credibility.

In 1 Kings 17:22 Elijah raised a boy from the dead.

In 2 Kings 4:34-35 Elisha raised a boy from the dead.

In 2 Kings 13:20-21 Elisha's bones raised a man from the dead.

In Acts 9:40-41 Peter raised a woman from the dead.

In Acts 20:9-20 Paul raised a man from the dead.

At this point it might be important to notice a clear difference between all of these signs of people being raised from the dead and the resurrection of Jesus. All of these mentioned above, along with our present focus on the raising of Lazarus from the dead, returned to their physical form and resumed life in their human bodies. Jesus, however, according to most of the stories in the Gospels, was resurrected to a "glorious" appearance that was quite unlike any noted before. When we speak of the resurrection we are not talking about resuscitation, the act of reviving a person and returning them to consciousness. Resurrection, a revival from inactivity and disuse is the simple definition in the dictionary. The Easter acclamation among Christians is, Alleluia,

Christ is Risen, with the response, Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia! The word risen is definitively, risen - (of e.g. celestial bodies) above the horizon - "the risen sun". The Rt. Rev. John S. Spong, in one of his latest papers online, "The Meaning of the Resurrection - Part III" says,

The New Testament clearly regarded the moment we have named "Easter" as a life-changing experience, indeed so powerful a moment was it that eventually the followers of Jesus decided to make it indelible for all of history by making the decision to view the life of Jesus as the life by which history was itself divided. So all of human history came to be seen and understood as having two distinct parts. There were the years before Christ, which were to be called BC, and the years after Christ referred to as years lived in the power of his ongoing and continued presence, which we called Anno Domini, or AD, "The Year of our Lord."

I believe this summarizes and demonstrates the universal impact of the dramatic and lasting effect that resulted from this phenomenon the author of the Gospel of John is attempting to portray. With so little of the knowledge of the universe as we now understand it, he chose the only literary form that was available then to make his point in his time. Although our horizons have broadened immensely as we move forward in time, as the scripture says, we still "see through a glass darkly".

Another important fact about this story of the raising of Lazarus from death is that it only appears in this chapter of the Gospel of John and no where else in Christian Scriptures. When you realize that this Gospel was the last Gospel to be written, decades after the Synoptic Gospels, and that this story is only mentioned here seems highly unique and unusual. The name Lazarus is mentioned once in Luke 16:19-31, but this Lazarus is the one in a parable who was covered with sores and very poor who sat at the gate of a very wealthy man. This Lazarus, who is said to be the brother of Mary and Martha living in Bethany, is only mentioned in John 11:1-46. When I checked on the name of Martha, I found the name twice in Christian scripture. The first mention is in Luke 10:38-42 where Jesus visited with Martha and her sister Mary, but there is no mention of Lazarus as their brother. This is where Martha was disturbed because her sister Mary sat talking with Jesus while she had to prepare and do all the work. It is only in John that we hear about their brother Lazarus who died in Bethany and where Jesus came to raise him to life again. Why wasn't such a dramatic and unique event like this mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels and why was this the only time we are introduced to Lazarus? I am sure you can imagine the many speculations about this among those who study scripture without any credible answer.

As we begin to look into this story in scripture itself we immediately run into another interesting twist as Jesus is informed about Lazarus. (vs 4-6) *"When Jesus heard this he said, 'This illness is not to end in death; through it God's glory is to be revealed and the Son of God glorified.' Therefore, though he loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, he stayed where he was for two days after hearing of Lazarus's illness."* The next paragraph in this story begins to get to the main focus which is not about Lazarus but about Jesus as the Christ. Jesus is warned by his disciples about the dangers of going to Bethany, so close to Jerusalem, because *"the Jews there were wanting to stone you"*. Jesus, in his typical fashion, replies to them with an analogy about daylight and nightfall and the twelve hours of daylight he has to walk in and not stumble like

those who walk at night when light fails them. Jesus feels the light of God in him and is sure of his mission to announce and establish the Realm of God in this world.

In the next paragraph Jesus then further announces, *"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I shall go and wake him."* The disciples assure him that his sleeping will enable him to recover and did not understand that Jesus was speaking of Lazarus's death. He then goes on to tell them that he is glad for this turn of events for the sake of the disciples *"for it will lead you to believe"*. The author of this Gospel is trying to primarily tell us about Jesus and how the disciples came to believe and follow him. Lazarus is simply a "sign" that will help us focus on this process and perhaps come to believe in Jesus as well. As we enter fully into the metaphor of this scenario we may begin to reply as did Thomas, *"Let us also go and die with him"*.

The story now continues with their progress to Bethany and the variety of emotions in the life of all who will be gathered at the tomb of Lazarus. As we begin it is important to notice the opening words of this next paragraph, *"On his arrival Jesus found that Lazarus had already been four days in the tomb"*, and that Bethany was only two miles from Jerusalem. The four days are notable because, *"This detail is mentioned to make it clear that Lazarus was truly dead. There was an opinion among the rabbis that the soul hovered near the body for three days but after that there was no hope of resuscitation"*. The Gospel according to John I-XII Introduction and Commentary, by Raymond E. Brown, pg. 424, Doubleday & Company, Inc., New York. We are told further that many Jews had come from the city to console Martha and Mary and that Mary was sitting at home when Martha went out to greet Jesus when she heard he was on his way.

In 11: 21-44, Now we come to the real transitional point of this sign and what makes it the final episode that triggers the rest of the story in the Gospel of John. As we begin this part Jesus says, *"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever has faith in me shall live, even though he dies; and no one who lives and has faith in me shall ever die. Do you believe this?"* In response to this question Martha answered, *"I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who was to come into the world."* The rest, as they say, is history! In my opening paper to begin our discussions about these seven signs that this Gospel uses to focus on Jesus as the Christ, the anointed one, he presents Jesus again saying, "I am" the resurrection, the light, the door, the way, etc. <http://janddhealth.com/GJIAM-YouAre.pdf> As you will see in that paper, I am convinced that the fullness of the Realm Of God is demonstrated; not only to tell us about who Jesus is but also to explain who we are as active witnesses today in this Realm of God that Jesus established.

This last sign was the last straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak. Notice how chapter 11 continues at verse 45 ff. *"Many of the the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. But some of them went off to the Pharisees and reported what he had done. Thereupon the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a meeting of the Council..."* (vs 45-47) What was their main problem? *"If we let him go on like this the whole populace will come and sweep away our temple and our nation."* (vs 48) Then Caiaphas, the high priest, points out, *"You have no grasp of the situation at all; you do not realize that it is more to your interest that one man should die for the people, than that the whole nation should be destroyed."* In verse 53 the Gospel concludes, *"So from that day on they plotted his death."* Now, the Gospel of John, tells us clearly and emphatically why Jesus was put to death.

The claim that Jesus makes about the presence of God in his life and the possibility of that Godly presence in each of our lives seemed as incredible then as it still does today. In his day the people who saw and heard him were awe struck. As we noted above, Jesus was not the only one who was able to "raise the dead" to continue their human existence but there was certainly something uniquely different about Jesus. People were heard to say, "never has anyone spoken like this man" or "he speaks with authority". The signs, when he performed them, were not done to make Jesus look good but to emphasize and demonstrate the power of God and the Realm of God to which everyone was being called to realize and experience. Jesus was not proclaiming something for his own worth and benefit but to extend to the whole world the good news that God was truly among them so that they could experience and have life in all its abundance. It was this authenticity that absolutely struck fear into the hearts and minds of the political and religious leadership of his day.

As we consider this seventh sign in the Gospel of John what effect does it have on our hearts and minds? Is this simply another miracle that "proves" something about Jesus? Is it a demonstration of the validity of the "Good News" Jesus came to proclaim and establish in our world? Could it be that these signs might have an effect on our lives in the same way that it had an effect on those who received and saw them? Is this purpose more akin to what the author of this Gospel desired when he wrote, *"There were indeed many other signs that Jesus performed in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. Those written here have been recorded in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this faith you may have life by his name"*?

At the end of chapter 11 in verse 54 we are told, *"Accordingly Jesus no longer went about openly among the Jews, but withdrew to a town call Ephraim, in the country bordering on the desert, and stayed there with his disciples."* This becomes the next and most important time for Jesus and his disciples as presented in chapters 12 through 17. The time of Passover was soon coming and Jesus and his disciples, as faithful Jews, would take part in the Passover celebration, but this time it would be the beginning of the end for Jesus. This section is often referred to as the Farewell Discourses when *"Jesus knew that his hour had come and that he must leave this world and go to the Father"*. He had accomplished some striking things among them and he would now seriously engage them to prepare for their legacy in continuing what he had begun with them. In the middle of this section Jesus tells them in 14:12, *"In very truth I tell you, whoever has faith in me will do what I am doing; indeed he will do greater things still because I am going to the Father"*. For a modern day examples of "great things" we can do today - if your reading this online - then go here:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eXO_ApjKPaI&feature=youtube_gdata_player
and/or

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZboxMsSz5Aw&feature=youtube_gdata_player
[or copy them and paste them in your browser]

Because I believe that this Gospel of John is applicable today for those of us who choose to follow Jesus I will follow with a paper on this Discourse section. The raising of Lazarus was a spectacular close to the active ministry of Jesus and his disciples and perhaps we too need to be raised and inspired as we follow these discourses for ourselves. We also are challenged to greater things as Jesus promised we would be able to do while we also imitate his humility. For me the

signs noted in this Gospel were not primarily about Jesus as a person but about his mission as the living word, the son of man. Jesus was a faithful Rabbi who promoted the Realm of God and all that this Realm would be like if humanity would believe in and follow what Jesus was saying and doing.

In the last century, and especially as we begin this 21st century, we have seen many "greater" things that benefit humankind and dramatic changes to bring advances in almost every field of human endeavor. There have been amazing advances in science, medicine, technology along with an increase in the economy of many areas that once were rather dearth. All of this would be cause for great rejoicing if it were not also true that these advances, with the growth of populations, still leave too many people without or few of these amenities of human advances. This Realm of God, or the dream of God, as fostered by Jesus is still lacking for too many because of the same kind of human self-interest in the leaders and people who are capable and responsible for energizing such changes.

Just looking at the United States of America alone we can clearly see this problem, especially in those who claim to be followers of Jesus the Christ. In his recent book, "Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power and How They Can Be Restored", pg. 233, Marcus J. Borg points out that there are basically two very different views of Christianity evidenced today. *"Heaven-and-hell Christianity with its focus on the afterlife and its individualism obscures the dream of God for this world. God's Word became flesh in Jesus not to take us out of this world, but to redeem this world. Recall that redeem means to liberate from slavery -- to liberate the world from its bondage to the powers that obstruct God's dream of a transformed world. These two visions of Christianity--one emphasizing the next world and what we must believe and do in order to get there, the other emphasizing God's passion for the transformation of this world--are very different. Yet they use the same language and share the same sacred scripture, the same Bible."*

In my next paper, we will join the disciples as they listen to Jesus in his farewell discourse. We will hear Jesus speak about God's Realm so that it may become their passion and dream to carry on his mission here on earth. As you will recall, if you have read my first paper on the Gospel of John, "I AM - YOU ARE", Jesus assures them that as disciples they are able to establish and continue to build God's Realm and redeem the world.

May the caring peace of God that goes beyond human comprehension, declare God's love for you in your heart and mind as we see it in Jesus Christ; and may the blessing of God, loving Creator, gracious Liberator, and life giving Spirit keep you steadfast now and always. Amen.