

# The Raising of Lazarus: The Descending God begins the Ascent

## *Exegesis of John 11: 1-44*

*Et lacrimatus est Iesus.*

*Edakrusen O Ihsous.*

*And Jesus wept.* (John 11: 35)

### OVERVIEW:

The structure of this essay will be a four-tiered framework exploring *context* (how John's Gospel fits into the overall picture of the four Gospels and how this passage fits into the body of Johannine writing), *content* (what the story is about and what it meant to the early church), *convention* (what literary devices John employs to communicate the story and its meaning) and *commitment* (what theological conclusions can be drawn, and what practical applications can be made to move the reader from intellectual to experiential understanding.) In the course of this process I will endeavor to open this passage of scripture to a deeper understanding, richer life engagement and practical application in Pastoral Ministry.

The sources from which this essay are drawn include: David L. Barr's *New Testament Story*; Raymond E. Brown (ed.) *The Gospel According to John*; Bernardo Hurault and Patricia Grogan, FCJ *The Christian Community Bible*; Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, SJ (ed.), *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*; Carroll

Stuhlmüller(ed.), *The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology*; and Alan Richardson and John Bowden (ed.), *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*. Web resources include Felix Just, SJ, *The Gospel of John*; and Louis Berkhof, *New Testament Introduction*. English quotations are from the NAB, Latin from *Novum Testamentum: Hieronymi Vulgata*, and Greek from Stephens 1550 *Textus Receptus*.

CONTEXT: John as a Non-Synoptic

## *And Jesus wept.*

*"There is a context into which our reading of scripture ought to be framed... The world within the text: Literature;... the world behind the text: History... and the world in front of the text: Our Culture."* **David Barr:** *New Testament Story* (pp. 3-5)

Revered by scholars as the "Theologian among the Gospel writers" (Berkhof, *New Testament Introduction*), John writes a Gospel distinct in structure, style and story from that of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Some of the most significant differences in these criteria of structure, style and story are seen in the Lazarus account.

While Luke records 18 miracles of Jesus, Mark 12 of those with four additional, and Matthew a total of 14, John recounts only seven such deeds. Quite intentionally, he refers to them not (as

do the synoptics) as *miracles* (*thavman*), but as *signs* (*simeon*), underscoring their importance not as illustrations of the *power* of Jesus, but as revelations of the very *nature* of Jesus. (cf Barr, *New Testament Story*, p 386) Though there are other "raising" miracles mentioned in the synoptic Gospels, and many of the theological elements referenced in John's Lazarus account are explored in the synoptic accounts and in Paul's letters, John is the only evangelist who tells the actual story of Lazarus' raising. And his

telling, more a conversational dialogue than the prosaic/narrative tradition of the synoptics, has a different intent than the recounting of miracles typical in the other Gospels.

**Matthew, Mark and Luke set out to tell us what Jesus did, how he acted while he walked this planet. As the visionary, the poet, John is concerned less with the facts and action and more with the overriding truth of the timeless God's intimate presence in human history.**

**There's a richly wise Rabbinical saying about truth: "Truth is too important to be limited to the facts."**

**While the other writers tell us the facts about what Jesus said, John invites us to more deeply explore why he said it, moving from the limitation of fact to the truth of the bigger, cosmic, picture.**

This raising of Lazarus, the conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, the healing of the paralytic at Bethesda, the multiplication of the loaves, the forgiving of the adulteress, the curing of the man born blind, when these are presented by the synoptics they are as stories and *miracles*, demonstrations of what power divinity *has*. In contrast, John presents them to us as *signs*, illustrations of what divinity *is*. The Gnostic influence here is clear: Jesus is not merely someone *doing* deeds, nor merely a wise man teaching: he is, rather, God *being* God. Jesus, in a Johannine world of darkness and light, evil and good, illusion and truth, is the victorious and ultimate brilliance, goodness and revelation toward which all creation is destined. Yes, John's Jesus is the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures, but, as Bruce Vawter recounts in the *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 416, John appears much more comfortable in the Gnostic, Hermetic framework of syncretistic Hellenism where parables and instruction are replaced by allegory and symbolism. The synoptics would have Jesus speak in simile and metaphor: "the Kingdom of Heaven is like..." or, in the style of "the Father is like the bread of life...." Rather, John has Jesus proclaim without poetic allusion, "I *AM* the Bread of Life."

Written at the very end of the first century CE, John's account is addressed to a community distinct from both the Jews-for-Jesus band of Mark (circa 65 CE) and the post-temple destruction/nascent "Christian" audience of Matthew and Luke 70-85 CE). John's readers are culturally and religiously diverse, spread out through the Hellenic world, more likely to speak Greek than they would Aramaic, Hebrew or Latin, and already well versed enough in the story of Jesus. What they seek and find in John is not "what happened with this Jesus?" but "What does it all mean?" These readers knew the story—what John offers is a movement from Kerygma (proclamation) and Didache (teaching) to Gnosis—knowledge. (Alan Richardson, *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, p. 316)

As for literary placement within his Gospel, John's eleventh chapter account of the raising of Lazarus speaks strategically from a structural midpoint between what biblical scholars delineate as this Gospel's three sections: The Prologue: the Logos of God (1:1-18), the Book of Signs (1:19-12:50) and the Book of Glory (13-20). (Felix Just, SJ, *The Gospel of John*)

#### CONTENT: *The Story/ Jesus as Sacrament*

John's Gospel, especially the longest portion referred to as the Book of Signs (1:19-12:50), is replete with references to "signs." This raising of Lazarus, and the six other miracles recounted in this Gospel, are referred to as "signs," rich with

the markings of sacrament in their illustration of physical, tangible, external interactions that reveal God and bestow grace. It is important to understand that Jesus' raising of Lazarus is NOT simply a para-normal, metaphysical act of Jesus' independent will—Jesus *engages* the family of Lazarus, grieves with them, and then, not from a distance, but from the intimate place of his own tears, CALLS Lazarus forth in an ACT of divine power and palpable human interaction.

From Jesus' first sign, the wedding at Cana, on through to this seventh and final sign, John makes clear the sacramental nature of Christ's incarnational mission on earth. Jesus' actions are not simply the blessing of the most ordinary of human activities, but the acknowledgement of the Divine within the mundane.

What makes the "Jesus wept" passage of John 11:35 so particularly interesting is that, in the midst of the deep theology, cosmology and mysticism that characterize this chapter and John's writings in general—a heady platform from which presentations of an emotional and human Jesus would not ordinarily be, pun intended, second nature—John carefully inserts this Johannine unique and extremely human detail: *Jesus wept*. Touted as the shortest verse of Christian Literature, (Yes, Paul's 1 Thessalonians 5:16 exhortation, "Rejoice always!" is another contender for that distinction) this simple passage presents a Jesus that is so clearly human, even in the very moment of his effecting a "divine" act.

And the weeping of which he speaks is not your run of the mill crying. The Latin and Greek translations of this passage refer to an intense flowing of tears of compassion for others (lacrimare) as opposed to tears of personal regret or sadness for oneself (flere). (Felix Just, SJ, The Gospel of John) Although John describes Lazarus as “the one whom Jesus loves,” using in various references both the agapo and phileo forms for Jesus’ relationship with Lazarus and his sisters, Jesus weeps not for his personal loss. Jesus knows what he was about to do—raise Lazarus—and so weeps not for himself, but in solidarity with, and compassion for, the loved ones around him whom he knows are in the depth of grief. He weeps not because he loves Lazarus - not because Lazarus has died – for he knows what he is about to do -- he weeps because Mary weeps. He weeps because he is sharing the heartache of the sisters —because, as Patricia Grogan, FCJ notes in her commentary from the Christian Community Bible , p. 211, “as a fully-enfleshed human being he sympathizes with them in their pain.”

**D**rawing this compassionate Christ capable of experiencing the grief of another human being and personally identifying with the loss of others, John celebrates Christ’s humanity, seeing this apparent frailty not as a contradiction, an inconvenience to the spirit, but as the crucible into which God’s loving presence is poured and made most tangible. Jesus does not end his conversation with the grieving Martha and Mary by saying, “Don’t worry; everything will be all right.

Lazarus will rise again.” While acknowledging that belief, Jesus also acknowledges the real-life, present-day pain of those around him and allows himself to get close enough physically and emotionally to take in the pain and sorrow, pleasures and joys of life his own life, and of those around him.

Many of the believers of John’s time (and, indeed, many of ours as well!) held the Gnostic belief that suffering is the result of a fatally flawed Creation, a condition for which the only solution is a secret knowledge (Gnosis) which will shield and save the elect who are born with this insight or somehow rise to it. (Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology, p 226). For John, who was certainly deeply influenced by this philosophical paradigm, his drawing of a weeping Jesus, the Knower of All, the Avatar of Avatars, in tears, is a remarkable contradiction.

John’s Jesus does not simply himself, or call his loved ones to, “rise above” suffering, to “offer it up” because they “know” everything will be alright.

**Jesus reaches not into the knowledge of the situation (Lazarus will rise, now, and on the last day) but deeply, compassionately, into the experience of the situation. Jesus’ response to suffering is neither to avoid nor discount it, but, rather, to acknowledge it,**

**experience it with those who are burdened, and challenge himself and them to gradually see the deeper truth within it.**

Such truth will not be known by mere observation, but only by being *truly in it*, openly embracing the darkness until in its reflection is seen the brilliance of the loving compassion of God. No secret here—all Creation is invited to this wisdom.

**I**n the process of this compassionate experience with his beloved Martha and Mary, Jesus sees an ideal moment for teaching. He engages the sisters in a dialogue, nearly Socratic in its “What do you think about resurrection...” format. He takes this opportunity (as he often does in John’s account) to remind those he is teaching of the ancient Hebrew roots they share. Far from unfamiliar with the Pharasaic belief in the afterlife (some scholars such as Hyam MacCoby in his Jesus, the Pharisee contend that Jesus was himself a member of the sect) Martha quotes to Jesus Daniel 12: 1, “My brother will rise...” and Jesus asks: “Do you believe this?” John has Jesus use the verb Pisteuein = to trust, as opposed to the weaker word: “believe,” elevating the discussion from “what are your intellectual assents?” to “What is at the core of your heart’s sense of who God is?”

As in the book of Job, the character discovers the ultimate triumph of relationship over theology,

so in this compassionate encounter with the Jesus who weeps, Martha and Mary move from knowledge to experience. This additional challenge to the Gnostic view resonates so well (by no accident, of course) with the reading from Jeremiah 31: 31-34 with which it is paired in Cycle A of the Lenten Lectionary. Jeremiah's prescient grip of the New Covenant is rather astonishing in its ahead-of-its-time perceptiveness. The Old Covenant, based on the Law, will be brought to perfection with a New Covenant, a Covenant based not on law, but on the indefatigable love of God. A covenant by which. "All, from least to greatest shall know me." The New Covenant is one in which both knowledge and experience dance together, each supporting the step of the other in an ongoing interplay of one leading to the other. It is through knowledge that we can better experience, and through experience that we can better know.

This "Jesus wept" reflection of Christ's fullest humanity cum divinity is absolutely elemental to a sound Christology. The first centuries of the Church were rife with differing opinions of Jesus as divine/human (Westminster, p 40): Ebionism and Arianism (Christ was not divine); Docetism and Appolinarianism: (Christ was not really human); Nestorianism: Jesus was in essence two persons, Mary being the mother of the human Jesus, not the divine. Eutychianism and Monophysitism: Jesus was neither fully divine nor fully human. It took nearly three centuries for the Church to agree, at the Council of Nicea

in 325, on the Principle of the Hypostatic Union, the tenet which holds that Jesus expresses his essence as both 100% divine and 100% human.

Perhaps they just should have asked Martha and Mary?

Indeed, these sisters, one a well-intentioned if somewhat frenetic homemaker referred to in Luke 10:38-42, the other, contentiously identified by some scholars as the penitent sinner whose perfumed hair drenched the weary feet of this itinerant preacher (Luke 7:36-50) saw Jesus as The Living Sacrament, God Incarnate re-calling all Creation to that immanent and ever-present Alpha and Omega that begins and ends John's Gospel. John has these witnesses of Jesus come to the gnosis, yes, but, by deep engagement with Jesus move from knowledge to empeiria, experience. In fact, the discursive, dialogic nature of John's account (in contrast to the more narrative/objective treatment of the synoptics) allows for the story to unfold in a dynamic, interactive way. Martha and Mary do not merely hear Jesus, they engage him, and he, them.

When he arrives at the tomb of his beloved Lazarus, he experiences the pain of loss, and from there, not in spite of being there, he initiates the evolutionary process of acceptance (inclusion) and movement (transcendence). Jesus cries out, in no fingers-crossed wish, but with the certitude of "Lazarus: come out!" The cry is not merely a promise of "I will raise

you." but, more importantly, a challenge and command: "Lazarus—do your part!" And as Lazarus comes forth, delivered from the binds of spiritual death, Jesus charges the onlookers to take part in the experience "Unbind him, and set him free!"

### *CONVENTIONS: John's Literary Devices*

The motion of John's Gospel is of Descent (Incarnation, Logos, Signs), leading to the Ascent through which Jesus (and Creation) return to God. Symbolic language such as "down to Galilee..." (where Jesus begins his ministry) and "Up to Jerusalem," (Ascent) where Jesus' ultimate conquest of life over death will bring him to the Father. The raising of Lazarus in Bethany, on the way to Jerusalem, foreshadows and prepares for the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Unfolding this path of Ascent, John is the master of irony, in this story, and throughout his Gospel. "This sickness is not leading to death," Jesus says --but Lazarus' sickness does, indeed, in nine short verses later, result in his death. Is Jesus pulling a fast one here? John takes this opportunity to illustrate Jesus' teaching that "life" is about being connected to God, not merely having a pulse. And death, though a change in physical form, is NOT synonymous with disconnection from God.

The word play goes further yet: Jesus' command for Lazarus to come out of the tomb is the same word (deuro) that John uses for the calling of the

disciples. Jesus *invites* Lazarus to live. Lazarus is given a choice—and receives life by saying “YES!”

Jesus’ shout (kraugizo) in v. 43 gives life to Lazarus. The same word is used by the crowds shouting for Jesus’ death (18:40; 19:6, 12, 15), and just a week before his Passion, in 12:13 where the Palm Sunday crowd shouts their Hosannas.

The dead are bound (deo of Lazarus in v. 44 and of Jesus in 19:40) in bandages. Jesus’ act of releasing (luo) Lazarus results, again, ironically, in Jesus being physically bound (deo) at his arrest (18:12, 24). These same two words (deo & luo) are used in Mt 16:19 & 18:18 as the authority given with the Keys of the Kingdom. Could resurrected Lazarus symbolize the “loosed” (*luo*) and “forgiven” (*aphiemi* -- used in the last line of v. 44 “let him go) sinners?

Perhaps the biggest irony here is that Lazarus’ sickness and death and Jesus’ raising of him in Bethany, just across the Jordan from Jerusalem, will lead to Jesus’ own death. This amazing sign of Jesus proves to be the straw which breaks the camel’s back, the final insult to the authority of the religious leaders who for three years have been asking “Who is this blasphemous man who speaks with such familiarity of the Father?” Hard will be the fate of the man who speaks the simple prayer as he stood before the tomb, a prayer not of power, but of gratitude: “Father I thank you...”

Another significant and symbolic word-

play pointed out by Raymond Brown in his commentary on the Gospel According to John, p. 431, is the use of *philios* to identify Lazarus as “beloved” and, the same word, in plural (*philoï*) to identify the Christian community to which John writes in his third letter, fifteenth chapter. This Lazarus account, written nearly 60 years after the death of Jesus, and 30 years after the earliest Synoptic writings, reminds the early community that the Jesus who raised Lazarus is as much present to that community, and to those in centuries to come, as he was to the witnesses who directly experienced him. What Jesus did for the community of Judea, or this particular friend, Lazarus, be it the feeding of the hungry or the raising to life, Jesus continues to do through the spirit that dwells within the faithful.

**COMMITMENT:** *Where John’s Jesus invites us*

John’s eloquently human portrayal of Jesus suggests that perhaps it is not the resuscitation of Lazarus that is the miracle of this account, but rather the remarkable capacity of humans to knowingly enter into the mystery, vulnerability and pain- guaranteed danger of deep relationship and commitment. Perhaps the miracle isn’t that we rise, but that we have the courage to connect to each other, to commit to ideals, full- knowing that death, loss and un-control are the only guarantees we have on the journey we take returning to the place and to the One from whom we come.

Jesus is trying to tell us something here with his

intense immersion in the physical reality of the suffering of Martha and Mary. Maybe the lesson is that we aren’t called so much to rise above the slings and arrows of life, as much as we are challenged to embrace them, our own and the world’s, so that we (like Jesus) might not merely transcend them, but indeed be transformed by them, even as we transform them.

It is, as Raymond Brown notes, in *The Gospel According to John*, p. 432, the decision of Jesus to leave Judea, where he’d raised Lazarus, and head to Jerusalem, which will seal his fate. Jesus knew who he was, what his mission was, and he would let no fear prevent him from accomplishing it. Jesus asks the very same of Lazarus: “Come out!!!” And of the community: “Untie him.” Even in the account of Jesus’ first resurrected appearance to Mary (20:16) Jesus cautions against letting the status quo, the place of comfort, dominate our lives when he tells his beloved Mary of Magdala, “Do not hold me.”

**And he asks of us, today,  
this minute, the same:  
“Come Out of your tombs!  
Untie those bound, and loose  
your own bindings! Live!!”  
John’s Jesus invites us to  
join him on the path to True  
Life, acknowledging the  
Descent, and embracing the  
Ascent to the fullest and  
richest life in the Father.**

---

*Now and again your word reaches me--What moments those are!*

*Everything stops short, as between heartbeats.*

*A strange joy, as though my face were touched and held by two hands, as though an egg split in two, and I stood there, born for a change; alive for a change---*

*Utterly changed (for a change.)*

*Then, of course, my old demons return; or as they say, life goes on*

*Which is to say, and closer to the fact death goes on--*

*Except that death does not quite go on, not in the old way not altogether calling the plays. Those moments of grace! Like an arrow of sunlight along a mausoleum floor*

*Something is happening, the door must be slightly ajar.*

*I have a name for you; you are the crack of light under the door of the city morgue.*

*Any moment now I may hear my name called: "Lazarus"*

Daniel Berrigan from [Uncommon Prayer](#)