

The Raising of Lazarus: A Sign of Hope

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Readings: Ezekiel 37:12-14; Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45

“In nihil ab nihilo quam cito recidimus (How quickly we fall back from nothing to nothing).” So goes an ancient Roman epitaph cited by Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical *Spe Salvi* to illustrate what Paul means when he tells the Ephesians that before Christ they were “without hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:12). Several centuries later, during the so-called Dark Ages, Venerable Bede tells of the pagan Northumbrians’ decision to convert to Christianity. As Bede describes their belief, life was like a sparrow flying into a hall during a stormy winter night for a brief moment before flying back out again, not knowing what comes before or follows after life. But, according to Bede, one advisor to the Northumbrian king replied, “If this new doctrine [Christianity] brings us more certain information, it seems right that we should accept it” (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*).

It should not surprise us, then, that in our secular age, we encounter existential despair around us, and, indeed, find that many of the faithful struggle with doubt and even agnosticism about where they have come from and where they are going. One common coping mechanism for this is to focus on a worldly goal, to “hope in a better future,” and to contribute to some notion of progress and evolution or some other type of “legacy” after death. In a culture full of contradiction, ours is one that finds death to be the most natural of things and yet finds it to be also one induces great fear and avoidance. It was Kierkegaard who, in describing the despair hidden beneath surface of nineteenth-century bourgeois Christianity, said that, for the Christian, death is only a “minor event” in the context of eternal life (*Sickness unto Death*). For the Christian, who has been “baptized into Christ Jesus” and thus “baptized into his death” (Rom 8:3), the prospect of eternal life is offered, in union with Christ, the one who in today’s gospel declares himself “the resurrection and the life” (Jn 11:25). This is the source of hope, the doctrine that is “new” today just as it was 1,300 and 2,000 years ago.

The Creator Redeems and Resurrects

On the first Sunday of Lent, we heard excerpts from the creation of human beings and their Fall in the Book of Genesis. Death is the consequence and indeed fulfillment of that sin, as God said it would be. In the first reading for this fifth Sunday of Lent, Ezekiel addresses his prophecy of God’s promise of resurrection to the dry bones of Israel who cry out, “Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, and we are cut off” (Ez 37:11). As St. Athanasius writes in his treatise on the Incarnation, God would not be not true if human beings did not die after God said they would. But it would also be “unworthy of God’s goodness” to let human beings, who participate in

the Word by their rationality, to move inevitably toward nothingness and thereby undo God's work of having made them in his image and likeness (*On the Incarnation of the Word*, 6). So, we see in today's Gospel: Jesus, in raising Lazarus, enacts the miracle that is a sign of the coming fulfillment of the prophecy of Ezekiel in today's first reading. The raising of Lazarus is, of course, the miracle that, in John's telling, leads to Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection by which he becomes "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor 15:20). Lazarus will die again, but to be raised again on the last day as part of that future harvest (cf. Jn 4:36).

For the attentive reader of the Gospel of John, it should come as little surprise that the one "through [whom] was life" (Jn 1:4), the one who declares that he "came that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (Jn 10:11), and who promises eternal life to those who believe in him (cf. Jn 3:15–16, 36; 4:14; 5:24–29, 39–40; 6: 22–71; 10: 28–29; 11:25–26; 17:2–3) would raise Lazarus. As St. Augustine writes,

A man was raised up by Him who made man: for He is the only One of the Father, by whom, as you know, all things were made. And if all things were made by Him, what wonder is it that one was raised by Him, when so many are daily brought into the world by His power? It is a greater deed to create men than to raise them again from the dead. Yet He deigned both to create and to raise again; to create all, to resuscitate some . . . and that is sufficient to let you know that, were He so pleased, He might raise all the dead to life. And, indeed this very work has He reserved in His own hands till the end of the world. (*Tractates on the Gospel of John* 49)

For Augustine, this is less a cause for wonder than a cause for rejoicing: If the one by whom and through whom we are created is the one who will raise the dead, then it is clear that we do not arise from and return to nothing, but, rather, find our origin through God and will return to him: "the author of life" is also "the author of salvation" (Gk. *αρχηγον* in Acts 3:15; Hebrews 2:10), or as Christ says of himself elsewhere, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev 23:15 cf. 21:6).

Baptism and Salvation: Growing in Union and Friendship with Christ

To be clear, this is not a case of inevitable salvation. Such an idea is no less a temptation today than it was 2,000 years ago, when Paul exhorted the Roman Christian community in today's second reading: "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." And, even more so: "Whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (Rom 8:8–9). Upon our deaths, no matter who we are, we will encounter the one who created us and render an account. We, who were called into being by the Word, will be measured by how our lives were lived as a corresponding response to that call. Even being "buried with him through baptism" requires that "we have grown into union with him" in living in accordance with our baptism (Rom 6:4–5).

Living in accordance with our baptismal vows and growing into union with Christ is not simply a matter of checking off the boxes for each of the vows. Thomas Aquinas, in commenting on today's gospel, reflects upon the fact that Lazarus and his sisters are friends of Jesus. The depth of this friendship Thomas sees in the sisters' lack of a request and a seeming confidence that Jesus will respond as a friend would, "willing the good of a friend as one's own good." Thomas notes elsewhere that obedience to God is not the cause of friendship but, rather, is the sign of it; likewise, affliction and bodily illness is not an indication that one is not a friend of God. For Thomas, "the true sign of friendship is that a friend reveals the secrets of his heart to his friend" as if it were to his own mind and heart.

With this, we can, on one level, appreciate more profoundly the rather direct and frank dialogues between Martha and Jesus, and then Mary and Jesus, as well as Jesus' joining in their weeping. On another level, we can see why it is fitting that Jesus raises Lazarus, his friend and one whom Jesus loves along with his sisters (Jn 11:11,

5), as a sign of the future resurrection. The revelation of Jesus' mind and heart is a sharing of his mind and heart: For those who do not believe, it is an attempt to induce faith (cf. Jn 11:42), and for those who already believe, a cause for greater love and union with him. We do well to recall the John's Prologue: "He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him. But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God" (Jn 1:11–12).

Participation in Divine Life as the Basis of Eternal Life

What we find here in John's gospel, we hear, too, in Paul, whether in the language of the "Spirit of Christ" or just "Christ" being within (Rom 8:9–10) or the "mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16; Phil 2:5). More than that, as *Lumen Gentium* reminds us, this is not an abstract reality but becomes concrete in our participation in the Church through sacraments: "By communicating His Spirit, Christ made His brothers, called together from all nations, mystically the components of His own Body. In that Body the life of Christ is poured into the believers who, through the sacraments, are united in a hidden and real way to Christ who suffered and was glorified" (7). While we live our earthly life, every time we receive the sacraments worthily, we receive the life of Christ, the one who is Life himself, conforming us to the Son, making us children of God.

Whether we speak of life or the Spirit—who, of course, is "the Lord, the giver of Life"—we do not speak of some abstraction or impersonal force or wispy entity but the reality of the Tri-Personal God, who is Father, Son, and Spirit, into whose life the sacraments draw us up in participation. Likewise, we all too often confuse eternal life with God with what is called in theological lingo the "intermediate state"—the soul's experience of the beatific vision after death, imagining a purely spiritual eternal life of the beatific vision—when in fact God promises more in and through our participation in the Triune life. We, of course, profess to believe "in the resurrection and life of the world to come," that is, the reunification of body and soul in a "new heaven and a new earth" in which God dwells among us (Rev 21–22). This is the eternity God offers and that makes every moment of our lives one of eternal significance, consequence, and hope. As Pope Benedict puts it:

Communion with Christ in this life prepares us to overcome the barrier of death, so that we may live eternally with him. Faith in the resurrection of the dead and hope in eternal life open our eyes to the ultimate meaning of our existence: God created men and women for resurrection and life, and this truth gives an authentic and definitive meaning to human history, to the personal and social lives of men and women, to culture, politics and the economy. Without the light of faith, the entire universe finishes shut within a tomb devoid of any future, any hope ("Message for Lent," 2011).

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For Further Reading

Augustine, [Tractates on the Gospel of John, 49](#)

Thomas Aquinas, [Commentary on John 11](#)

Pope Benedict XVI, [Message for Lent, 2011](#)

Pope Benedict XVI, [Spe Salvi](#)

In Short . . .

- *God responds to human notions of existential nihilism and despair in the face of death by revealing that he is both origin and end of creation.*
- *The raising of Lazarus is a sign of God's promise of resurrection and eternal life and is the sign that leads to Jesus' own redemptive death and resurrection.*
- *Friendship with Christ, like that between Jesus and the household at Bethany, indicates that resurrection is consequence of our increasing participation and union with Christ in our cooperation with the graces received through the sacraments.*
- *The promise of resurrection endows every moment of life with eternal meaning and significance.*