

**THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST: DEAD OR ALIVE; JOHN 11:5-6; APRIL 2,  
2017/LENT VI; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

One of the great things about hard to understand poetry and abstract art is its inexplicability. Words and reason fall short of tagging, naming, and categorizing the subject matter such works deal with.

So that we have to read the poem again and yet again; or step back from the painting or sculpture and let our minds go free of trying to answer the question what does it mean? As if in finding a quick and easy answer to that question we can then walk on to the next painting or sculpture to dissect and analyze it and in like manner “do” the gallery.

Yet, what the riddle of such art does is shake us loose from our neatly organized worlds and transport us to another space where our need to keep the anxiety caused by unanswered questions about life at bay is exposed and we find ourselves confronting a truth: the world is sometimes any enigma and defies our attempts to explain it.

That we can be confused and forced to confront our limitations is not always a welcome experience. Today’s story from John is like a confusing poem or painting.

The raising of Lazarus reveals that the world and human existence are more wondrous and surprising than we often see in our day to day lives; and perhaps even more wondrous and amazing than we are willing to accept. This is the Easter story and we will consider the bold challenge it makes to our linear, proof-based worldview in a few weeks.

But the portion of the story we heard this morning, that occurs before Lazarus is raised, offers another revelation: not only do we live in a world where raising people from the dead is unheard of but our expectations of God as a loving deity and Jesus a compassionate Savior are challenged when Jesus strangely delays going to help Lazarus.

Jesus’ choice to ignore the impending death of a cherished friend and grief of a family that have supported him from the beginning not only doesn’t add up, it contradicts who we think Jesus is.

I know the account goes on to tell us that Jesus says to his followers that Lazarus’ illness is for the glory of God and that Lazarus hasn’t really died because, though John hasn’t yet informed us, Jesus will raise him, therefore, Jesus says Lazarus has only ‘fallen asleep’; this statement amounts to either an cruel euphemism or the central and profound truth at the core of Christian faith.

Soren Kierkegaard was so fascinated by this story that he rewrote and retitled his first attempt to explain it in a short work called *The Concept of Dread*, but after his conversion to Christianity he re-visited the epic battle of death v. life in a work titled *Sickness Unto Death*. Lazarus’ sickness was *not* unto death because he was finally raised to life; but the real sickness unto death, says Kierkegaard, is human despair because it closes our hearts and minds to the Risen Christ.

The fact is Jesus knows that by the time they arrive to Bethany Lazarus will be physically dead, wrapped in grave cloths and sealed into a tomb for four days. When he finally appears on the scene, Lazarus' grieving sisters are hosting a houseful of grieving friends, loved ones and synagogue members.

Jesus' entrance to the house makes a 'scene' which from the larger strategy of the story is exactly what his late arrival is intended to do; Jesus consoles the sisters, is moved to tears himself, which prompts others to say 'see how he loved him' as if to confirm that Jesus' delay wasn't because he didn't care about Lazarus; Jesus is then taken to the tomb and orders the stone to be rolled away and Lazarus to come out; at this point everyone shrieks because of the anticipated stench of a decomposed human body.

When Lazarus appears at the entrance to the cave, grave cloths dangling, everyone believes – Mary and Martha, who already knew that with Jesus anything was possible; but also friends and synagogue members – plus the disciples who weren't always ready to believe, nor sure what Jesus meant when he said Lazarus was only sleeping.

A comment from Marilynne Robinson regarding how our secular, sound bite culture attempts to understand Jesus helps; Jesus, from her perspective, does not conform to the present impulse everywhere visible from the latest 'life for dummies book' to those who have turned organized religion into a self-help philosophy by shrinking and reducing what is complex to appease the multitudes and leverage profit.

The life of Jesus, Robinson writes, is very well attested by the standards of antiquity. *Yet, how he is to be understood is a question of another kind.* The essential point is that the demand or proof, as 'historians' of religion would have it, if it were made rigorously and consistently, would and has led to disappointing results.

Yet, this by no means justifies the conclusion that whatever cannot be proved is therefore meaningless or false. Nor would it legitimize the burgeoning of fundamentalist truth claims that are themselves totally unprovable and that flourish in contempt of evidence. In fact, this kind of thinking is pandemic in contemporary society, and Robinson for one takes comfort, if a cold comfort, in the fact that many members of Congress participate in or defer to it (e.g., anti-science legislation); and so she feels free to use the traditional vocabulary of faith.<sup>i</sup>

Robinson writes that she is drawn to Calvin's description of the world as a theater, with the implication that a strong and particular intention is expressed in it, that its very limits and boundedness, are meant to let meaning be isolated out of the indecipherable weather of the universe at large.

She quotes John Locke to say that just because something is bounded, limited, or finite does not mean that human experience constrained by it, is likewise limited but rather can be empowered, expanded, extended.

Having proposed that all thought is based on four simple ideas Locke said, do not let anyone think these simple ideas too narrow for the capacious mind of man..., which takes its flight further than the stars.

This from a British empiricist philosopher who, with a few others, gave birth to modern thought rooted in the human capacity for reason and logic, yet who did not discount or divorce himself from the mystery and wonder of the universe.

David Brooks wrote on Friday that we may be living in a world that has reached the twilight of its existence; a moral universe that has finally come unhinged from moral categories associated with traditional religious practice; and yet it is a world still fully possessed of what feels right and wrong although it does not possess the vocabulary rooted in religious practice to discern, debate and decide matters of moral and spiritual consequence.

Brooks is spot on. The spirit-clogging resistance to a transcendent God and faith in the western world may have entered the bloodstream in the Enlightenment but it congealed like a clot in the artery of faith in the nineteenth century and has caused spiritual necrosis in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As Brooks writes in his article, our guilt has no where to go to be forgiven or atoned (vestigial religious concepts as outdated as the appendix) but lodges in what has become a widespread feeling or tumor of victimhood – because if I make myself a victim of the actions of some liberal or conservative ideology I no longer have to feel guilty; I can rant at political oppressors.

The Gospel of John comes to its great crescendo when Mary recognizes the man she thought to be the gardener as the Risen Christ on Easter morning. But we are not yet there. Which is why, here in late Lent, today's story is so compelling and relevant.

If you have ever felt abandoned by God or let down by your faith, if you have ever been left with disappointment or betrayal in some circumstance where what you counted on or someone you counted on did not meet your reasonable hopes and expectations, then today's story is for you.

On any commonsense human accounting, Jesus' delay is incomprehensible, even inhumane. But perhaps this is just the point. Jesus does not act in accord with common sense or even by standards of what is generally regarded as humane. He and his revelation of God are unique, are once and for all, and are not subject to the standards of the science or the methodology of history.

When you stop and think about it there are other egregious delays in justice, in healing. From the time the Hebrews went into slavery in Egypt to the time they were delivered – 400 hundred years; forty years wandering in the wilderness; 400 years from God's last words in the Old Testament to the first words of the New.

Stanley Hauweras says Israel's faith was "a long training in being out of control" of their relationship with God, without despising God. Grace which means gift isn't grace if it is predictable, programmable, and on demand.

Maybe that's why God takes God's own good time to show up. One mother commented she was disappointed her son who'd attended church from early childhood was not a Christian yet. Her pastor responded, "God has God's ways of getting what God wants. Tell your son to keep looking over his shoulder as he moves into his 40's."

Faith isn't just belief in something; it is belief coupled with the acknowledgment of our limits. It is coming face to face with our finitude that also recognizes that we are not in complete control of our circumstances; that what coming to faith may mean is that we just may choose to be 'out of control' and learn to depend upon God.

The philosopher Kierkegaard conducted his campaign against organized religion in a nineteenth century Denmark – not unlike our time – in which preachers attempted to make Christianity 'plausible' which led to its 'domestication.' So that in Denmark where prostitution was legal but practitioners had to be licensed, the state required those applying to show their baptismal certificates to be approved.

What the story today teaches us, if it teaches us anything, is that we can finally understand God at work in our lives only by letting go of our human resources and coming empty-handed to receive the gift of faith.

There's no easy answer to the perplexing circumstances and riddle of today's story: Jesus strangely delays going to see his gravely ill friend Lazarus.

The people in the story don't have the benefit of seeing into the future to know how this will turn out. They are crushed by death. So are we.

What the raising of Lazarus reminds us is when that happens to us, even as it may be happening now in some of our lives, it's not the end of the story. Patience. Trust. God works in mysterious ways.

Those are good words and practices to add to any spiritual vocabulary. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things: Essays*; (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: New York, 2015) 259-261