

David C. Myers
April 10, 2011
Lent – 5

“Managing God”

John 11:1 – 45

Text: “Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.” . . . John 11:21

It was a Thursday afternoon in February of 1988. Our tour bus had left behind the Jordan Valley and Jericho and was “going up” to Jerusalem. “Going up” because Jericho is 1100 feet below sea level and Bethany and Jerusalem are about 2500 feet above sea level – In a space of about 19 miles. 1988 was before there was a “security” wall separating the Palestinian territories from the Israel land. Precisely two miles short of Jerusalem we pulled into Bethany to visit the Church of the Resurrection and the purported Lazarus’ tomb.

We visited the tomb first – a place we did not visit this past February. The tomb has 23 narrow, irregular steps in a tunnel-like spiral stairway one must take going down to a cave to get to the actual tomb. And once we got to the tomb, we were surprised to find that we could go into it. It was damp, clammy and uncomfortable inside and had a slightly unpleasant odor. Tom McKeown, my District Superintendent at the time, went inside the tomb, and after a short passage of time, using the words of Jesus, I said loudly, “Thomas, come out!” And true to Scripture, Tom came emerged from the tomb, and . . . I took a picture.

I think there was more cynicism present at this spot than at most others. First there was the issue of raising people from the dead. Many in our group, despite it being a cherished Biblical story never believed it literally happened. And then there was the spot itself. Even though it was a very old cave and tomb, I suspect that many didn’t really believe that this was the spot where Lazarus was raised from the dead – if they even believed there was an actual place.

And, if you can bear with this most unusual story of Jesus bringing someone back to life – even someone as old and smelly as a District Superintendent – perhaps some of you, being faithful to your Lenten Journey of fasting, repentance and self-denial, might be wondering why we have a resurrection story while we are still in Lent. After all, aren’t we supposed to be preparing for the resurrection of Jesus, not jumping the gun and celebrating it early? I mean, couldn’t it wait until Easter?!?!

And if you are that intentional about your Lenten Journey, I commend you! But I would also commend **to you** that there is something very Lenten about this story. Because if our Lenten Journey is so programmed, so rigid that the power of Jesus cannot burst through; then we are not being open to the workings of God’s Spirit.

You see Mary and her sister Martha were in a dither. Their brother Lazarus, who was also a friend of Jesus, was very sick. He was dying. But they also knew they had an “in” with Jesus, the great healer. He was one of their “close friends.” Surely he would

come and heal their brother – one whom Jesus loved. After all, isn't that what friends are for? So they send for Jesus to come at once. And they are playing their trump card – “Lord, he whom You love is ill.” And Jesus, upon hearing the request, for reasons totally unknown to us, decides to stay in the place where He was. Then two days later Jesus decides to go to Judea, where Bethany is and where Lazarus lived.

But the disciples don't want Jesus to go there; they are confused and scared. They know what happened the last time Jesus was there, and it was not so long ago – the religious people tried to stone Him. And the disciples were worried that when Jesus gets there the religious people will try to stone Him again. But Jesus is resolute and says to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.”

Now, consider this; there were no cell phones back then, not even land line phones; there wasn't even telegraph, and for that matter there wasn't even pony express. So you have to love the way Jesus has of *knowing things* – even though Martha never even sent him a text message telling Him that Lazarus had died.

Of course the disciples don't know that Jesus is talking about Lazarus as dead, so they protest even more. And then Jesus “told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” And Thomas said to the rest of the disciples, in essence, “OK if Jesus is so bullheaded, we might as well go with Him so that we can die with Him.”

And they get to the tomb, and Lazarus has died, the family has wound him in grave-clothes and Lazarus has been inside this tomb for four days. In the words of the King James translation – “he stinketh.”

Martha goes ahead to greet Jesus and she is not happy. “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.”

And oh, how we relate to Martha! How many times have we rehearsed the “if only” lines in our minds? “If only I had practiced the piano more.” “If only I shown more love to my children.” “If only I had studied more in college.” And there is the other side of the “if onlys:” “If only I hadn't made this choice.” “If only I hadn't bought that (you fill in the blank).” And we can bring other people into our litany, as did Martha that day, “If only you had been here.” “If only . . .” we all have our own litanies – either for ourselves or for those we would like to blame. And the tragedy is that some of us never get beyond those lines.

Martha's line, “If only You had been here,” is one of the ways we try to manage God. We want God on our terms – we don't want God staying away for two extra days; our needs are more important. We want God at our beck and call. We want to manage God, because after all – don't we know more than God does? Don't we know what is best? Our anthem is Frank Sinatra's “I Did It My Way.”

Barbara Brown Taylor, one of the great contemporary preachers, tells the story of her friend Matilda who died of Lou Gehrig's disease; which means she gradually lost control of all her muscles. Her face went first, then her vocal chords, then her legs. For the last year of her life, she communicated by writing on a slate, one of those erasable things kids play with. Sometimes she would write and erase faster than anyone could read. Matilda found a lot to be excited about.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “It was all I could do to watch her die. I wanted someone to walk into her room with a pill or a prayer that would cure her illness or at least halt its progress, but even if that happened – even if Jesus Himself had showed up to call her from her tomb – she would have had to die all over again later, as Lazarus did. It would have been a rescue from death instead of a triumph over it, a resuscitation instead of a resurrection.

But Jesus will have none of the “if onlys” and certainly Jesus is not going to let other people’s attempts at managing Him deter Him from fulfilling His life. So Jesus says to Martha, “Your brother will rise again.” And Martha retorts, as any good church person would, “Lord, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” And Jesus next response comes to her like the buzzer on *Family Feud* when a wrong answer is given. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in Me, even though they die, yet shall they live, and everyone who believes in Me shall never die.” And then just to make sure, Jesus says to Martha, “Do you believe this?”

Do you notice that Martha said she “knows” that Lazarus will arise at the resurrection on the last day; but Jesus wants more than just “knowing?” Knowing doesn’t often lead to action or change, knowing can be very passive. So Jesus asked, “do you believe?” When we believe something we act on it. When we “know” something, we can tuck it away for future reference.

One theologian, E.D. Maurice, said that this discussion depressed him because, he observed, “how sad it is, that after 2,000 years, the church has gotten most Christians only to the point that the Jews were at Bethany: [that is the] resurrection [happens] in the future; resurrection a week from Tuesday. Only a handful have ever gotten past that point and made the leap of faith that Jesus got Martha to make: the leap to resurrection **now.**”

Edith Wharton put it in a negative way when she said, “People all stopped living at one time or another, however many years they continued to be alive.” It is like the adage that says, “You do not grow old, but when you stop growing, you are old.”

It seems to me that we need to remember that God’s primary purpose is not to get people into heaven, but to get heaven into people.

You see, the biblical term, “eternal life” is not about the length of life, but rather about the quality of life. Periodically we need to be reminded that “eternal” isn’t restricted to “after death”. In fact, it doesn’t even mean “after death”. Rather “eternal” means without beginning and without end – always was, always will be, and always is. In other words, eternal happens now. The resurrection is not just a passport to another world, but it is also a quality of life for this world.

Scripture reveals that God coming in Christ is not simply a particular point in time, it is not simply something that happened 2,000 years ago; but that Christ is something that is happening to each and every one of us. Christ as eternal means that Christ is contemporary to every moment in time. And as some of you know very powerfully, Christ can be a powerful presence in your life now!

And this makes a considerable difference. If Jesus only happened 2,000 years ago, then the events are only limited to history and our memories. If Jesus is only a historical

event and oddity, then Jesus makes no difference in our lives. . . . But if Christ is eternal and living in us now – than whatever the tomb we find ourselves buried in, whatever the “if onlys” we rehearse daily, it all can be removed from us, and we can be set free.

And – do you know what?! – the Christ event can give you the resurrection now, and you can come alive again!

Fast forward 23 years. This most recent visit to the Holy Land took us inside the Church of the Resurrection. It has some spectacular frescoes on the ceiling and walls, depicting the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Johnny Nelson, a deacon from the Chantilly Baptist Church wanted to deliver the devotional message while we were there. At first I was confused, for I thought Johnny wanted to deliver his message at the Garden Tomb; but by the time Johnny finished, I fully understood.

He shared with us that 4 years ago he and his wife were on a vacation and she suddenly dropped dead. He was left alone in a hotel room in Europe while all the details of shipping her body back to the United States were worked out. He was alone in a strange place with an immense amount of grief. He literally knew no one. They started out having a wonderful vacation. And then this. Confusion, grief and anger were ruling Johnny’s heart. A very religious man, Johnny cried out to God – with anger, with grief.

You know, we may believe that Jesus has the power to raise the dead, but we don’t want Jesus practicing on us. We want a God Who will cut our losses and cushion our failures, a God Who will grant me a life free from pain. We want a God Who will rescue us from death; a God Who will delete it from the human experience and help us find another way to operate. And so when unexpected death or illness abruptly interrupts our lives we get angry.

And then suddenly it all came to Johnny, as if God was lifting his burden.

Johnny recalled this story of Lazarus being raised from the dead. He told us how Martha was upset at Jesus and said to Him, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.” He said he had felt exactly as Martha did. God had deserted him. God “let” his wife die in the midst of their vacation!

But then Johnny realized how Jesus said to His disciples when He first heard of Lazarus’ illness, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” And then Johnny said it was like a revelation. He said he realized that it is not all about him and his anger and his grief! His wife was going to die, the timing was horrible; but she was going to die. Rather, it is all about God’s glory. He realized, in other words, that his anger, his inconsolable grief was only an attempt to try to manage God – just as Martha and Mary had tried to manage Jesus. You see, what they wanted, to use Barbara Brown Taylor’s words, “was a rescue from death, rather than a triumph over it; a resuscitation instead of a resurrection!” Johnny concluded by saying his God is a God of the resurrection!

And perhaps from Johnny’s lesson we can pray, “Lord, I believe, but help me with my unbelief.”