

Jesus' Amuse-Bouche

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Lent 5 (Year A [John 11:1-45])

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At fine dining restaurants, the really fancy sort, patrons will sometimes receive an amuse-bouche. 'Amuse-bouche' is French for 'mouth-amuser' (that they call it that is awesome) and it consists of a single, bite-sized hors d'oeuvre, or appetizer. You can't order an amuse-bouche though. Amuse-bouches are offered solely at the discretion of the chef. You get what you get — which is whatever the chef decides to put on the tiny little amuse-bouche plate. It is like the food that comprises the meal, but it's just a little taste — and incomplete, but delicious, whetting of the appetite.

In the feast of Jesus' death and resurrection, the raising of Lazarus is Jesus' amuse-bouche. The raising of Lazarus is no more the resurrection we celebrate at Easter than a lightly poached quail egg topped with fine imported caviar is a 20-oz aged porterhouse with truffled mashed potatoes. The raising of Lazarus is good — it's just not the fullness of what God is ultimately up to, what we will celebrate in just two weeks: the ultimate defeat of death.

But even though it is an amuse-bouche and not the main course, even though it is *a* resurrection but not *the* resurrection, this wonderful story illuminates some wonderful truths about life, and death, and then life again with Jesus.

The first thing we see right off the bat in this passage is that Jesus is plainly unconcerned by Lazarus' illness and impending death. Like, it's totes no big deal. Look at verses 5-6, "Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was." What this translation is trying to get at, and what is very clear in the original Greek, is that it was *because* Jesus loved them that he let Lazarus die.

Did you know there is a little known verse of the song "Jesus Loves Me" about this: "Jesus loves me, this I sigh, for he let my brother die."

If this is what it means to be loved by Jesus...

Do you think anyone bothered to ask about how Lazarus felt about this plan? Cause if I were Lazarus, I think I'd say, "Ok. I really like the part about being alive next week. I think that's a real strong point in your plan, Jesus. But I wonder if it

might be a little better to skip the dying part, and the rigor mortis, and the making my sisters anoint my dead body with tears and spices, and the tomb, and instead, you know, just not die?”

Now, reading this story and making the inductive leap that this is what it means to be loved by God, that God will somehow do something like this to you, isn't valid logically. But, it is certainly valid to deduce that one of the things being loved by Jesus cannot mean is that Jesus will not let us suffer. Jesus simply has a broader perspective on the world than we do. This illness, and Lazarus' temporary death are ultimately for God's glory. In their agony, of course, Mary and Martha, cannot see this. And I mean cannot — not just that they don't see it — they cannot see it. There was no way for them to see it until after the fact.

Nor can we always see the larger story of what God is up to in our lives, especially when we're "in the moment." Now not all suffering is like this, but sometimes aren't we blessed with a certain perspective as time goes on — how the end of a relationship, a terrible injury, or the loss of a job ultimately led us to a richer and fuller life. Sometimes though, often, I think, we leave this world without being able to fully see what God was up to.

Jesus is sympathetic about this. When he sees Mary and the mourners in verse 33, he weeps. Jesus weeps with us. But, that doesn't mean he saves us from all suffering.

After Jesus lets the two extra days pass, he tells the disciples that it's time to go back to Judea, the larger region where Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived. The disciples resist, because by this point in the story, Judea has already become a dangerous place for Jesus — the priests and Pharisees are anxious about his teaching and his miracles and want him out, or offed. So Jesus explains to the disciples why they must go. Verse 11: "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples don't get it — they figure if Lazarus is asleep, he'll wake up, and he hardly needs Jesus and the disciples to do it. They see this as some sort of bad Aggie joke: "Hey guys, how many Aggies — I mean apostles — does it take to wake up a sleeping Lazarus?"

So Jesus puts it in terms the disciples can understand: Guys, "Lazarus is dead."

To Jesus, Lazarus is asleep. To everyone else, Lazarus is dead. God does not see dead people the way we do. In fact, God doesn't really see dead people at all. God sees sleeping people. As Jesus puts it in the other gospels in reference to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God is not the God of the dead, but of the living (Matt 22:32).

From God's perspective, we human beings must be a little bit like those cute toddlers in viral videos who find themselves a magazine and begin tapping at it like

it is an iPad. We watch their increasing frustration at their broken iPad with amusement, for we know that it is in fact not a broken iPad but a magazine. I like to imagine that when it comes to death, God looks at us with — well, sympathy of course — but also a little bit of amusement, because he knows that what we're dealing with is not really a dead person, but a sleeping person.

But, we do not wake up from this sleep of death on our own. That only happens with God. And most of the time, we are not woken back up to this world the way Lazarus was. Thank goodness! Because as impressive as that is, there is a certain something Sisyphean about this resurrection, is there not? Jesus gets Lazarus out of that tomb, but one of these days, Lazarus is going back in.

If the mythological story of Sisyphus doesn't work for you as a metaphor, what about video games? In first-person shooters, the sort of game where you go around shooting other people, there is a lot of dying. Except that no one really dies, what happens is that you get respawned. That's the name for your character coming back to life in the game. If you're not good at these games, and I never was, then what happens is that you die and get respawned — back to life, out of the tomb, so to speak — only to get shot again. This is what happens to Lazarus. It's not 10 verses into the next chapter of the gospel before the chief priests are making plans to execute Lazarus as well. Lazarus gets to live twice; but with that, he has to die twice.

The resurrection we believe in is not a respawning; it is not a coming out of the tombs only to go back in them again. The resurrection of the Christian faith is not a coming back to life, it is a coming to a new life, a broader, fuller life in the kingdom where there is, as the prayer book says, "neither death, nor sorrow, no crying, but only the fullness of joy."

This long chapter brings us very close to the end of John's narrative. Though there is a lot of teaching Jesus does in what's known as the Farewell Discourse, not much else actually *happens* in John between here and the Passion of our Lord. The main course is soon to be served — but we're not quite there. Jesus has not yet served the bread and the wine. He has not yet served the body and blood. This, the raising of Lazarus, is prelude to all that. This is the amuse-bouche.

And in it, the chef of this feast, Jesus, hints that the path to God's glory runs through suffering, not around it. Jesus shows us that his perspective on death, which is God the Father's perspective on death, is different than ours. What is dead to us is asleep to God. And in raising Lazarus back to life into the arms of his sisters and into the village of Bethany, he shows us that — as absolutely amazing as that is — something even more will have to be done if we are to find our end anywhere other than within the walls of a tomb.

A path of suffering, the dead as sleeping, and a need for something more than just coming back to life. These are tantalizing hints at what is to come, what awaits us in the news of Easter morning. The chef is showing off a little bit here, but just wait until the main course!