

“MIRACLES AND THE LAW OF UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES”

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Along the way to Easter, we take a detour to the tomb of Jesus' friend, Lazarus. Jesus, deeply grieving his friend, raises Lazarus from the dead. Yet his incredible life-affirming act only reveals the dark resolve of his enemies with death threats.

Do you recall me asking last week--Jesus' healing of the blind man--why did they not throw a party? Instead bickering and resentment ensued. It gets worse today. We spoke of Easter as the miracle around which all other miracles are arranged. We said miracles threaten our mastery over our tidy personal world and how miracles always disturb carefully, elaborately constructed illusions of being in control.

Even bigger than the point that Jesus can do such wonders is the response here by onlookers. Jesus finally visits the tomb of Lazarus. And in a voice loud enough to wake the dead, he shouts, "Lazarus, come out." Wonder of wonders, he does. A mummy-looking corpse appears. Then Jesus says, "Unbind him! Let him go!" A once-dead Lazarus stands before them. I have never seen such a thing as this.

What are we to make of this story? The strange reaction to this event, at least on the part of the good, Bible-quoting religious authorities is not joy or celebration. It is renewed determination to put a stop to Jesus and his movement, whom they perceive as totally out of control. At least, *their* control. The two sisters, Mary and Martha, are ecstatic to have their brother back. The theologians are less thrilled. In fact, John suggests it was this very miracle that led to the crucifixion of Jesus.

So the raising of Lazarus prepares us for Easter. But it also prepares us for Good Friday, as Lazarus' new life summons threats of death. The old established order finds resurrection threatening. And this always makes our late Lent story of the raising of Lazarus a bit odd. We might ask ourselves: will we greet resurrection with an embrace or a rebuff? That is the question before us with Easter so near.

Beyond the miracle, John's Gospel says it's Jesus nature to intrude, to surprise, to take our breath away, and to shock us with new life. We say we hate death, we long for freedom and release from this primal fact of death, which Paul the Apostle calls "the final enemy." But if wonders don't unfold on our terms, if we weren't consulted, if we lack categories to grasp them, we want no part of them. Funny how after all our complaints about our mortality we can prefer death to life.

Two years ago my first Easter sermon here was titled, Who Can Answer Death? I told of being around the Marys and Marthas who must face death, you know, the rituals to address our helplessness and abandonment. I went after Easter's central theme—God's defeat of death, how we're not equal to this but our God is.

A woman said aloud what I perceived in a few other faces—why preach on that? As though to say death is unseemly, uncouth and not meant for polite gatherings. I was amazed. Is there a bigger message at Easter than God’s defeat of death? I mean, I adore our Easter balloons, but if we aren’t going deeper than pastel eggs in baskets of green plastic grass and yellow marshmallow chicks we’re in trouble.

Some weeks later I sat with a young widow still smarting from losing her husband. She was asking big questions and digging deeply for answers. I found myself returning to those same themes of my Easter sermon. She hadn’t attended, but listened raptly now. As our time ended, she thanked me, then asked, “Is it true?”

I smiled and claimed the reality of the promises we’d shared was more real to me than chair I sat in, giving my chair arm a hard smack for effect. I couldn’t resist, I told her of my first Easter sermon here and our recoiling. She smiled, “Honestly, before this, I only wanted Easter bunnies and pastel colors. I was one of those who didn’t want to hear it. I preferred pleasantries. But I can’t afford that anymore.”

What happens to us that we grow so resistant to the core message of the gospel? We go to college, get sophisticated, and imagine we know more than we do. We assemble elaborately constructed mechanisms to defend our mastery over life. We disinfect our spiritual universe substituting pleasantries for core spiritual truth.

Like those who witnessed Jesus rally Lazarus from the grave, we begin not with a broad-minded, open-hearted determination to grasp and receive what God has done for us, not only in Jesus’ time, but eternally *for all time*. Instead we bring a close-minded refusal to consider anything beyond the status quo, meaning, miracles. I’m struck by how we resist religious dogmatism--good move, by the way--but then we’ll dogmatically resist any categories that make room for resurrection.

I have bad news for our time-honored resistance dating back to Lazarus’ raising. I bring reinforcements today. Last week I shared the mysteries of God in Christ at this table with eight third graders: mysteries of Jesus giving himself out of love, eternal mysteries of life, death and hope. We decided to treat the bread and cup with respect and to honor them: to treat bread and cup like we would treat living Jesus himself. They all promised me this with wide-eyed wonder. I believe them.

If that’s not enough, tomorrow and then again Thursday I’ll tell the Easter story to 75 of our nursery schoolers. We’ll strum a guitar and sing an anthem I taught my youth group back in the day, “Allelu, alleu, everybody sing allelu, for the Lord is risen, it is true, everybody sing allelu.” Guess what? I promise, they’ll belt it out.

Jesus said, to receive God’s reign, we must become like children. We let go of how big or smart we think we are to make more room for simple trust and hope. Paul Ricoeur, of the University of Chicago, calls this the second naivete. Our first naivete is our childish Sunday School faith where we accept things at face value. We move on as adolescents, imagining ourselves painfully grown up. But we in-

sulate ourselves from the living reality of anything beyond what we can grasp. We need a second naivete, big enough for signs or wonders greater than we are.

Easter is two weeks away. It's not too late. Maybe the same children who helped us with their small Jesus-like size to celebrate Christmas will help us with Easter. Of course, the first step in getting help is realizing we need it. Thanks, Lazarus. Amen.