

RAISING LAZARUS

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We're spending this Lenten season in the Gospel According to John, with particular focus on material exclusive to his telling. Two weekends ago, we were in chapter six, the high point of Jesus-mania in the Galilee. He'd been healing the sick, feeding multitudes from just a few loaves of bread and fishes. Wherever he went now, people were sure to follow.

But far from getting caught up in the celebrity, Jesus said, *You're just following me for the free bread. Don't work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life. I am the bread of life.*

Folks didn't much like the sound of that; noses were bent out of joint. Jesus winds up making the remarkable statement, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." So much for Jesus-mania. Folks headed for the exits in droves.

To the twelve who remained, Jesus said, "Do you also wish to go away?" That's when Simon Peter has one of his best moments, answering, "To whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the holy one of God."

Things degenerated to the point even Jesus' family of origin was concerned, his own brothers urging him to get out of town. John writes parenthetically, "For not even his own brothers believed in him."

A word about Jesus' "brothers." Some will say these must have been born to old Joseph in a previous marriage, as Mary spent her life in perpetual virginity. There's absolutely no Biblical basis for that. The church has really had some interesting ideas about human sexuality, and I, for one, would more than happy for Mary and Joseph to have had a robust life of marital intimacy, producing brothers--and sisters, for that matter—for Mary's first born.

FYI: I feel kind of badly for the child on the left side of this picture—one of the brothers, presumably. Looks like something out of a Charles Dickens' novel, holding his bowl of gruel while Mary lavishes her attention on what I presume is supposed to be a fair-haired Jesus. Say this for the brothers, it may not have been easy growing up in the same hovel as the Son of God. I can understand this might have created some friction.

However this is interesting. You might have thought, when Jesus left this earth, the aforementioned Simon Peter would have become chairman of the board. Not so. As told in the book of Acts, it is, rather, one of Jesus' brothers, James, who emerges as CEO, Peter and the others reporting to him. James was no nepotistic lightweight, either, having his own book in the Bible, including a verse near and dear to Methodists: "Faith without works is dead."

In the course of John's narratives, Jesus shuttles back-and-forth between his home turf, up north in the Galilee, and Jerusalem in the south. In chapter 7, he's in the Big Apple for the Festival of Booths, aka Sukkot, the harvest festival of the Jews. (In case you're wondering about the 5777 on the slide, that's per the Jewish calendar, this present year being 5779.)

They didn't have newspapers or TV in those days; there were no pictures of Jesus in circulation, so that people might recognize him. That didn't keep people from buzzing about the would-be Messiah of the North. Moving among the people, Jesus heard some saying, "He is a good man"; others, "No, he is deceiving the crowd."

That's when Jesus very publically went to the temple and started to teach. When some of us were in Jerusalem in 2011, we had a photo op at the Teaching Steps, the designated place at the temple where out-of-towners set up shop. The powers-that-be were still bummed from the last time Jesus was in town, him healing on the Sabbath in perceived contempt for the Law of Moses, then getting in their faces when they righteously objected. Jesus was not intimidated.

On this occasion, he's on a roll, when some begin to murmur, "How does this man have such learning, when he has never been

taught?” This much is true: Jesus had never been to rabbi school, had no degrees, no credentials. Here’s what he had to say to that:

“My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own. Those who speak on their own seek their own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and there is nothing false in him.”

And oh, by the way, “Why are you looking for an opportunity to kill me?”

I can hardly blame those who thought Jesus was coming across as paranoid; but, as they say, just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean someone isn’t out to get you. In fact, the matter was under discussion at the highest level of the Jerusalem religious establishment. Here’s the thing. Whereas in other places of Roman conquest, local religious expression has been outlawed, the Jews had been permitted to do their thing, worshiping the God of their ancestors. The leash was only so long, however.

For instance, the vestments and other ritual paraphernalia so essential for temple observance were kept under lock and key at the Antonia Fortress, the Roman citadel located next to the temple. So long as the Jews behaved themselves, the priests could go to the Antonia, check out their stuff, offer their sacrifices and such, with the expectation these would be returned at the conclusion of the service.

The rural rabbi was perceived as a threat to what was already a precarious balance. As read in John chapter 11, this was a cause of great concern to the temple movers-and-shakers:

“What are we to do? ... If we let him go on like this everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy our holy place and our nation.”

This was hardly an idle concern, as it had in fact been the fate of other peoples in other places of the empire. That’s when Caiaphas, the high priest, weighed in.

*Fools, you have no perception
 The stakes we are gambling are frightening high
 We must crush him completely
 So like John before him, this Jesus must die
 For the sake of the nation
 This Jesus must die
 Must die, must die, this Jesus must die
 So like John before him
 This Jesus must, Jesus must, Jesus must die.*

Just to be clear, the “John before him,” refers to John the Baptizer, beheaded for speaking truth to power, not to be confused with the author of the fourth gospel.

As a pragmatic guy who has myself been where the buck stops, I actually have some sympathy with Caiaphas. One man vs. the fate of the nation? There had already been speculation among the masses that the authorities themselves knew Jesus was the Messiah; how else to explain how Jesus was still walking around free, given some of the things he’d said and done?

As to Jesus being Israel’s long-awaited Messiah, while the things he was saying and doing were swell, this was against him: He was from the Galilee, the north country, and the scriptures said the Messiah would be born of the house and lineage of King David in Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem. It’s in the book, Micah 5:2: “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”

Let’s talk more about that. As we’ve said before, while the gospels are ordered Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, there is scholarly consensus that Mark’s was the first written, a barebones account starting with Jesus circa age 30 getting baptized by John the Baptizer. While incorporating much of Mark’s material into their own, Matthew and Luke make a particular point of establishing Jesus’ Messianic-cred. Both offer genealogies linking Jesus’ ancestry back to King David, along with narratives of Jesus’ birth: Mary and Joseph making their way from Galilee to Bethlehem as part of a government-mandated census, so that Jesus is, in fact, born in Bethlehem.

Back to Jerusalem: The chief priests were pressing on the temple police to silence Jesus. Arrest the guy. The temple police seem themselves to been Jesus-ized, “Never has anyone spoken like this!” This surely figured in, also: Given the size of the crowds, taking Jesus into custody would be harder than it might otherwise appear.

“Then the Pharisees replied, ‘Surely you have not been deceived, too, have you? Has anyone of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him?’”

Whereupon was heard the sound of one clearing this throat: Nicodemus. We met Nicodemus in chapter 3, coming to Jesus under the cover of night, as he surely wouldn’t want his Pharisee fraternity brothers knowing of the unauthorized meeting. The encounter is best remembered for the teaching in verse 16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whosoever believeth in him might not perish but have eternal life.”

Nicodemus figures prominently in what we have planned for Easter, the Gospel of John set to the songs of the Beatles, “All You Need Is Love,” heavy on the Abbey Road medley.

In this instance, John chapter 7, if Nicodemus isn’t ready to confess that he’d met with Jesus himself and Jesus was kind of cool, he does appeal that Jesus be afforded due process: “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing does it?”

The council could not but grudgingly agree. Grrr.

Chapter 8 begins with the woman caught in adultery, a narrative exclusive to John’s telling, Jesus famously saying to her accusers, “Let him who is without sin be the first to cast a stone.”

Last weekend, Mandy talked about Jesus’ seven “I Am” statements, including chapter 8, verse 12, “I am the light of the world.” Way back in chapter 1, John has written, “the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.” Jesus people

never deny the darkness. What we affirm is, no matter how deep the darkness, there is a light of hope, that no darkness can extinguish, even death itself.

Chances are you know of this teaching: “You will know the truth and the truth will make you free.” That’s found in John 8, verse 32, an exhortation of Jesus to those who will continue in his word.

We live in a time of competing truths, alternate facts. I’ve got my truth, you’ve got your truth; one truth is no more or less true than another truth, and the only truth is that there is no truth. Not so, says the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There is a truth above our truths, the truth of God, revealed to us, not through a set of facts, but a person, Jesus of Nazareth, who is the Way, the Truth, the Life. It’s in the book!

The powers-that-be launch a smear campaign: Did you know, this Jesus is really a Samaritan? Samaritans were despised as mixed-race mongrels, and at the very least that story he was telling about a Good Samaritan lent suspicion he was a Samaritan-lover. To which Jesus would have surely said: Of course, I am.

Others were saying he had a demon, but that had been laid on him back in the Galilee, and it’s hard to know if anyone was taking that seriously. Maybe.

Some weeks ago, in her message, “Rub A Little Dirt On It,” Mandy walked us through John chapter 9. To briefly revisit: Jesus and his disciples are walking along; they pass a man born blind, the disciples ask, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” Which begs the question, if the man was born blind, what sin could he have committed in the womb? Anyway, the disciples assumed somebody must have done something wrong to cause this. Bad things don’t happen to good people.

Jesus didn’t have much patience with that line of thinking, “He spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva, rubbed a little dirt in the man’s eyes,” told him to go wash it out, and, lo and behold, the fellow’s sight was restored!

You'd think people would have rejoiced: *Praise God! We're so happy for you!* Instead, the guy found himself caught in a whirlwind of controversy. Folks had the idea someone was trying to pull the wool over their eyes. Some were saying he'd never been blind in the first place, others that it was a case of mistaken identity—this was NOT the same fellow who used to sit and beg, but an imposter. Others were all in a huff because Jesus had once again healed on the Sabbath, in direct violation of the traditional religious codes they held so dear.

The poor dude is hauled before the religious authorities, who demand an explanation, him finally saying in exasperation, (John 9:25), "All I know is this. I was blind, but now I see."

I think I heard that in a song once:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind but now I see.

John Chapter 10 is all about Jesus as the Good Shepherd, yet another of the "I Am" declarations Mandy talked about last weekend, Jesus saying:

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand...sees the wolf coming...and runs away, because he does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. "

With retirement coming up fast now, there is nothing that would please me more than to think I might be remembered as having been a good shepherd at St. Andrew's. I hope I haven't approached this work, or the work I've done in any of the congregations I've been blessed to serve, as a hireling. This has been my life's calling, and whatever else may be said about my shepherding, I don't think it will be said, "He ran away."

John next tells us of Jesus in Jerusalem for yet another festival, this the festival of Dedication, better known in our time as Hanukkah,

the primo Jewish winter celebration. If time permitted, I'd break into the Adam Sandler song:

Put on your yarmulke
Here come Hanukkah....

Alas, time does not permit, other than to note that Sandler wrote the song for Jewish kids who felt left out at Christmas, noting:

Hanukkah is
The festival of light
Instead of presents
We have eight crazy nights.

Jesus had a crazy Hanukkah. People were pressing on him to fish or cut bait, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the messiah tell us plainly."

You want plain talk? he asked. Is this plain enough for you?:
"The Father and I are one."

That sealed it. Folks started looking for stones to throw. *Understand, Jesus, it's not for any good work we're going to kill you, "but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God."*

To be fair, the penalty for blasphemy was in fact death. Said so in the Law of Moses. Did Jesus in fact leave town under a hail of rocks? Don't know. What we're told, starting at John 10:40:

He went away again across the Jordan, to the place where John had been baptizing earlier, and he remained there....

John had been baptizing in the desolate region where the Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea, thirty mountainous miles removed from Jerusalem. As long as Jesus stayed out here, none of the authorities were likely to hassle him. Might get their clothes dirty.

Taking us to John chapter 11, starting at verse 1:

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.

Switching gospels: Luke has introduced us to the sisters in the 10th chapter of his account. Mary and Martha have opened their home to Jesus, who has gone to teaching in their living room. Martha, who may be seen as the patron saint of United Methodist Women, is busy with the cooking and serving; Mary, on the other hand, is sitting at Jesus' feet, hanging on his every word. This aggravates Martha, who says to Jesus, "Don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work myself?"

I would have personally been happy for Jesus to suggest that a few of his disciples, who had presumably heard these lessons before, might pitch in. As it was, he chided the hostess with the mostest:

"Martha, Martha, Martha. You are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Of course, that didn't get the dishes done, but I'm just reporting.

As to Mary having anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair, we'll come back to that. Taking up where we left off in the eleventh chapter of John:

So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This sickness is not unto death; rather it is for God's glory that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' 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.

Which was swell with the varsity apostles. Bethany was just over the hill from Jerusalem, where Jesus remained under *fatwa*. So, 48 hours later, when Jesus announces they're going that direction after

all, the disciples protest: *Last time we were there, they tried to stone you, now you want to go back?*

Says Jesus, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going to awaken him.” The apostles counter, *If he’s fallen asleep, he ought to be okay. No need for us to go.* To which Jesus said, *Dummies: “Lazarus is dead.” And I’m going to the funeral.*

That’s when Thomas weighs in. Thomas gets a bad rap, remembered as Doubting Thomas. The picture on the screen is from the other side of the resurrection, Thomas having a hard time believing this business about Jesus being raised from the dead. But no one could say Thomas lacked courage. In this moment, the others griping, *Heck no, we won’t go,* Thomas says, *We’ve come this far with him. Might as well die with him, too.*

Jesus doesn’t make this easy, does he? Remember that, next time someone wants to dose you with the prosperity gospel: *Jesus will make you healthy, wealthy and wise.* ‘Twas not the apostles’ experience, on either side of the resurrection. Jesus had been upfront about it. “If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” Say this: Jesus practiced what he preached.

By the time they get to Bethany, Lazarus is four days dead. Martha sees him coming: We’re told, “She went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.”

I’m thinking Mary was really disappointed in Jesus showing up late and couldn’t bring herself to look at him just yet. I get that. The sisters were heart-broken.

Forty-plus years later, I remember Marian Brown, the sole female on the faculty at the St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, sharing that her sister had been in a life and death crisis. Professor Brown was convinced that Jesus’ promise in John 11, “This sickness is not unto death,” was meant for her and her sister, and she felt betrayed when her sister in fact died. Some of you may relate.

Now, Martha, never one to mince words, says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Wow. Talk about a guilt

trip! “But even now,” she continued, “I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”

Sometimes, I think faith is most authentically lived out in the “even now” passages of life...” No, things have not worked out as I hoped; but “even now” I believe.

Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ Martha said, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’

That’s when Jesus spoke some of the most famous words in the pages of scripture:

“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

Jesus says to Martha, “Do you believe this?” To which she says, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Martha goes inside, tells Mary Jesus is asking about her and she really ought to talk with him. Whereas Martha seems to have been in control of herself, Mary is overcome with emotion. There’d been a whole lot of weeping going on; now Mary knelt before Jesus, echoing her sister between sobs, “Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died.”

Tears can be contagious. John tells us Jesus was “deeply moved.” *Take me to the place where you laid him.* Once there, standing at Lazarus’ tomb, “Jesus wept.”

A word about this “tomb.” One of my favorite Easter hymns is the old gospel thumper, “Up From The Grave He Arose”—with a mighty triumph o’er his foes!

That said, Jesus was not buried in a grave--as in six foot under; but entombed in a cave carved out the side of a hill; if not this particular tomb, one similar. Holy Land tourists are invited to go inside. This was a family crypt, with room for several occupants. /Here’s Sheila Coleman coming out of the tomb.

The remains of Lazarus seem to have rested in such a chamber. Tourists can visit what is said to be his burial cave, officially sanctioned by the Bethany Chamber of Commerce.

Even Jesus' tears were subject to scrutiny, some saying, "See how he loved him!" Others: "If this Jesus could open the eyes of a blind man, why couldn't he have kept his friend from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.'

The stone in question served to seal the tomb. Martha suggested this might not be such a good idea. Lazarus had been inside four days and there was bound to be a stench. To which Jesus said,

"Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the Glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they might believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth!'

Whereupon Lazarus came forth:

The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

There'd been a whole lot of mourners at the tomb, many from Jerusalem, which, to repeat, was just over the next hill. These go back to the city, tell the story, and their witness figures mightily in the next chapter, crowds lining the streets, waving Palm Branches, shouting Hosanna! as Jesus comes into town on the back of a donkey. Which in turn cements the conviction of the powers-that-be: This Jesus must die.

It's on the eve of his grand entrance into Jerusalem that Mary "anoints" Jesus. The sisters had thrown a dinner party in his honor, Lazarus himself was at the table. We read:

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?'

John adds by way of parenthetical comment:

(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

In fairness, as Matthew and Mark tell it, Judas was hardly alone among the apostles in being offended at what seemed a waste of resources. I sort of identify. Not with the thievery, of course—though I would note that in the reporting of Matthew and Mark, there is nothing said about Judas being an embezzler.

Earlier in this series, we have talked about intermural rivalry on the apostolic team and I hold to at least the possibility John was projecting ill-motive to the treasurer. I'm not one to talk about hands-on management, but you'd think that if Jesus suspected Judas was a thief, he would have hardly had him handling the money.

That said, I'm thinking if I'd been there, I might have taken a dim view. When I first came to St. Andrew's, I made two promises: I won't waste your time and I won't waste your money. I like to think I've been true to both. But this I know, too: While financial resources are a means to an end—defined at St. Andrew's as Sharing The Gospel of Jesus Christ—financial resources must never be confused as ends unto themselves. And so Jesus said:

“Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.”

Keeping financial accounts straight is important. A lot of what falls under the category of Church Administration is important. But

what's ultimately important, the first job of the church, is wonder, love and praise. And Mary got it right.

One more thing, sandwiched between what was just read and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, chapter 12, verses 9-11:

When the great crowd of Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and believing in Jesus.

We're not told if Lazarus was actually assassinated, but we can be sure of this: He died. Maybe not at this point; for all we know, he may have outlived Jesus by thirty years. But this much is sure, whatever the date of his passing, Lazarus has been dead and gone a long time now....

And this much is sure: We're going to die. You and me. Don't know when, don't know how. So I want to end with our old friend, Thomas, the other guys saying Jesus was nuts for wanting to going in the direction of powers and principalities, Thomas declaring, "Let's go, so we can die with him." Thomas would rather die with Jesus than live without him.

I've been blessed to live all these years with Jesus. And I have every intention of dying with him, holding to the promise that not even death can separate me from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. I wouldn't have it any other way. How about you?

Let us stand for the Benediction....