

Rise Up!

Rev. David Reynolds

John 11: 1-45

“When my third snail died,” the little girl writes sitting halfway in, halfway out of her desk, one leg swinging in air, ‘I said, I’m through with snails.’ That brief but telling story is told by Kathleen Norris in her book “Dakota, A Spiritual Geography.” She’s writing of a day when she as visiting poet was working with kids in a third grade classroom. In a dying school, in a dying town on the high desolate plains of western South Dakota, she was having them write about their lives. “When my third snail died, I said, I’m through with snails.” The power of death is always around seeking to determine, our thoughts and actions.

Norris, of course, found other responses to the power of death in that South Dakota town. In a place that basically never gets enough rain to sustain a population, ranchers and farmers have struggled to make a living there for a century, but the towns are dying for sure now. So, some other responses to the power of death include denial. There are those who swear that the “good old days” will one day return. And another response is to blame others. The fear of death creates a culture where people who’ve lived in a place and been active citizens for over twenty years are still seen as “outsiders.” Sometimes ministers there are blamed just for doing their job, starting support groups for bankrupt farmers, or suicide prevention groups, they are told they are just making things worse with all their “negative talk.” The power of death is always around seeking to determine everyone’s thoughts and actions.

That’s what this story in John’s gospel deals with. Lazarus is deathly ill. Mary and Martha can tell how serious it is. So, knowing their friend Jesus to be a healer, they send word to him. Now, as I’ve said before, you can’t read the gospel stories as straight-ahead newspaper accounts, and especially not in John’s gospel. If you try to read this story that way, you’ll end up with a lot more questions than answers. First of all, right here, why would Jesus who was always so compassionate intentionally delay going to a friend, one he loved so much, in need? And there’s lots more like that, that you can try to force logical answers to, but the point is, John is preaching the gospel of Christ to us in this story.

He doesn’t just want to report an event, there are theological things he wants to say! And they have to do with the meaning of resurrection of the resurrection life Jesus offers us in being part of him. They have to do with the meaning of the cross and resurrection as things that are inseparable. And so, therefore they have to do with the power of death, which is a power given by human culture, versus the power of life which is given by God. So, when Jesus is told of Lazarus, he says, “This sickness is not fatal. It will become an occasion to show God’s glory by glorifying God’s Son.” Now keep in mind, in John’s gospel whenever the glorifying of Jesus is spoken of, John means the cross as Jesus way back to God.

And so, as John tells the story, the raising of Lazarus did indeed become the straw that broke the camel’s back in galvanizing the plan to have Jesus killed. So, after waiting two days, to let death have its full sway, Jesus says, “let’s go back to Judea,” and his disciples aware of the power of death in regard to him and themselves immediately say, “you can’t do that, they’re out to kill you...” And you remember, after some discussion about why he’s going back, Thomas says to the other disciples, “let’s go, we might as well die with him.” The power of death is always around seeking to determine everyone’s actions in this story.

And so it is, when Jesus finally arrives Lazarus has already been dead four days. Martha, hearing Jesus is almost there runs out to find him and immediately blames him for her brother’s death. “If you’d been here...” And then thinking perhaps she’d overstepped, and hoping against hope she says, “but even so, I know whatever you ask God he will give you.” And Jesus says to her, “Your brother will be raised up.” Now keep in mind, Jesus in saying that is speaking the

truth of the gospel to a grieving sister. He is not foretelling what he plans to do! He's speaking of the truth of resurrection, and what that means for *her* in the face of death. What he does later with Lazarus is resuscitation, not resurrection. Lazarus, of course will die again at some later date. And the same thing's going on when Mary comes running out to Jesus, and all the official ritual mourners go with her. That's what they were, you know, paid professionals.

John actually uses two different words for weeping in this story, one for the kind of weeping Jesus does, and one for the weeping that Mary and these ritual mourners were doing that has that ritual connotation. It's why Jesus gets angry! Peterson's right in translating the word that way, even though a lot of other translations change it; the Greek word is angry. Jesus gets angry because ritual weeping (finally like all ritual) arises out of the fear of death. It's a response that says the reality of this life hemmed in by death is too much for us to face and to bear. Ritual, I mean think of weddings and funerals... ritual even as it helps us experience the depth and mystery of life, it also gives us a way to handle that, because the reality of it is so fearful. Jesus is angry because they don't get that the reality of God, the reality of Life, of Resurrection is stronger than that.

Their responses are determined by the fear of death. That is death's power, fear, fear of being hurt, fear of grief, fear of loss. It's the way it is with us. The fear of death is always around seeking to determine our thoughts and actions. Just like that little third grade girl wrote: "When my third snail died, I said I'm through with snails." Just like United Methodists and just about every other denomination pushing the panic button over declining membership numbers. The fear of death determining our actions. And in this presidential election year, pay attention how politicians play to and seek to appeal to our deepest fears. Would they be able to get elected that way if we really didn't live our lives reacting to the fear of the death as the final reality?

How do we stop living ultimately out of fear, reacting ultimately to the power of death? The power of death is always around but it's a cultural power. *We* give it the power it has to determine what we do. Listen to the truth of this story. By raising Lazarus, Jesus would free him and Mary and Martha and all the others for a new way of living, a way that is free from death's power, free from living out of fear. You remember? After Jesus says, "Your brother will be raised," Martha responds, "I know he'll be resurrected at the general resurrection when the new age comes in fullness." But Jesus wants Martha to hear the truth of the *gospel!* He wants to talk to her about how she can live her life now free from the fear of and power of death, even in the face of grief, even in the face of death. He says, "I am, right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, (you know, of course we will all die. We're finite creatures.) even though he or she dies, will live." That is, even though we are finite creatures who die, that fact doesn't have to determine our life.

In Christ, in God's unfailing love and grace, we don't have to live that way that is determined by death. We don't have to die spiritually, we don't have to die to who God is in us and in the world, we don't have to die to hope, we don't have to die to love, of snails or anything else. That's what Jesus means when he says, "everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all." We won't die spiritually. Of course, we'll die physically, but we'll be alive in and to and for God which either now or after physical death is the only life that is really life.

That's what Jesus is trying to get through to them all in this story. And he gets so angry that they just don't get it that he enacts it for them, even before he ultimately enacts it for them in his own death and resurrection. This story is as much about Jesus' death and resurrection as it is about the raising of Lazarus. So, Jesus says, "Where did you put him?" And they say, "Come and see," and then says John, Jesus wept. You see, this is the Gospel of John's garden of Gethsemane story. "Come and see," you remember, in John's gospel is the invitation to discipleship, and now it's said to Jesus as he walks to a tomb. He weeps, as in the Garden of Gethsemane, because he now sees clearly that his way, this way of living free from death's

power will lead him through death, will lead him to a cross. Cross and resurrection go together. And then, he foreshadows his own death and resurrection by calling forth his friend from his grave. "Roll away the stone," he says. And he calls Lazarus forth, but the key here is what he says to all those standing around. "Unbind him and set him free!" By raising Lazarus Jesus would free him and all of them for a new way of living, a way free from death's power, free from living life out of fear! And so, he would involve them in that life of being free and setting free right then.

Friends, as our scriptures say, in Christ we've been given a living hope. That is, we've been set free to live out of hope and not out of fear. We can trust in him, for he is the one who has shown us that even despite what may be written in our genetic code, self-survival is not the ultimate good. Self-survival, whether individual, or tribal, or national or religious, because all of that is really just "us and ours", which is just "me" writ large...self-survival is finally just living under the fear and power of death. The ultimate good is Life, which is the life of God given away in love for others, for creation, just as God, the maker and giver of life does.

In a wonderful and powerful musical re-telling of this story, entitled "Lazarus Dies Again," singer-songwriter Darrell Scott has Lazarus, after being raised, living a life he'd never even dreamed of before. He's become a celebrity, an authority on death, you see.

So sings Scott:

He goes on a lecture circuit

Hosts his own T.V. show

Has his pick of beautiful women wherever he goes

He advises politicians, he dines with kings

Gets a record deal and he starts to sing (and sing, and sing)

Then Jesus gets in trouble and goes to trial

Lazarus gets wind and lays low for a while

The network pulls the plug, the record deal heads south

He hides out in the cave behind Martha's house

And they weep, they cry and moan for their friend

All the lies the injustice and how he meets his end

They cry for a while then he starts to grin

"My God Martha, he's gonna rise again (again, again)

You see, it makes all the difference in the world. We are set free! Death and all the failure, disappointment, grief, heartache and fear that are its handmaidens, is not a threat. Life, in and for and by God's grace swallows it up. So, rise up Lazarus. Rise up Martha and Mary. Rise up you ritual mourners. Rise up you Sadducees and Pharisees. Rise up you and me. Rise up.

Amen.