

Sunday, April 10, 2011: John 11:1-45

In the Gospel of John, the raising of Lazarus is the cause of Jesus' death.

by [Karoline M. Lewis](#) in the [April 5, 2011](#) issue

As a John scholar, I have always been fascinated with the scribal confusion about Jesus' "I AM" statement: "I am the resurrection and the life." Some of the ancient manuscripts for the Gospel of John omit "and the life," with the assumption that this is a redundancy and that no self-respecting Jesus would repeat himself. This is Martha's misunderstanding, isn't it? When Jesus says to her, "Your brother will rise again," she hears only the promise of a future resurrection: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." But Jesus then seems to correct this misunderstanding. "I am the resurrection and the life," he insists. We might ask Jesus, as did the scribes who corrected him, what's the difference?

The chapter itself is structured with this misunderstanding in mind. The raising of Lazarus is the last of Jesus' signs in John's Gospel, with the actual raising of Lazarus narrated in only two verses. There is a repeated pattern in the fourth Gospel: a sign, which is followed by dialogue among the bystanders and then a discourse by Jesus that interprets the sign (see 5:1-47; 9:1-10:21). Note that in this Gospel, Jesus does not perform miracles but instead does "signs." Signs point to things. The miracle itself is not the point, as wonderful as it is—the point is what is revealed about Jesus and who Jesus is.

In the raising of Lazarus, the pattern is reversed. The dialogue and Jesus' discourse occur before the sign is performed. Why in this case does the interpretation of the sign come first? Why does Jesus comment on the sign before raising Lazarus from the dead? Is it because Jesus knows that his action will be misinterpreted, even by those who are closest to him, even by those who actually believe? Could it be that the sign's meaning is more important than the miracle itself, even more important than raising someone from the dead?

In the Gospel of John, the raising of Lazarus is the cause of Jesus' death. In the Synoptic Gospels, the cleansing of the temple is the impulsion for the plot to kill Jesus (Mark 11:18; Luke 19:47-48). But now the temple scene has been moved to the beginning of the Gospel, where it follows the wedding at Cana, and it is the raising of Lazarus to life that incites those who are plotting Jesus' arrest and death. In John 11:46-57, the chief priests and the Pharisees are told what Jesus did and "from that day on they planned to put him to death." Wanting to get rid of the evidence as well, the chief priests plan to put Lazarus to death "since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus" (12:9-11). It is Jesus' claim, "I am the resurrection and the life," that provokes them.

Again, we should ask why Jesus needs to explain what the raising of Lazarus means before he raises him. Is it because the sign would be easily misunderstood and misinterpreted, even by us? When we think about the raising of Lazarus, do we place our focus on "I am the resurrection" alone and forget that Jesus also says, "I am the life"? Do we too quickly jump to the security of eternal life, imagining our future residence in heaven (14:2-3) rather than the provision of life in the present?

Jesus interprets this one last sign for us because the answers to all of these questions are a resounding yes. Like Martha, we encapsulate resurrection as only future salvific existence and not as the possibility of life right here, right now, with Jesus. Yet for Lazarus, the Gospel describes not his future with Jesus but his life in the present. In chapter 12 the anointing of Jesus takes place at the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha in Bethany. We are told that Martha serves and Mary anoints Jesus, and Lazarus, whom Jesus has raised from the dead, "was one of those at the table with him," just as the Beloved Disciple will be when he is first introduced at the foot washing. That Lazarus is raised to life is his secure promise that Jesus will prepare an abiding place for him, but it is also the reality of new life with Jesus now. This new life is leaning on the breast of Jesus, reclining at the table with him, sharing food and fellowship. New life in Jesus is this intimacy, this closeness; it is not just the death of Jesus but also the life of Jesus that brings salvation. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, through which "we have all received grace upon grace."

Jesus breaks his pattern because in the end he was not sent into the world for eternal life alone. The Word become flesh means life right here and right now, everything that "grace upon grace" can mean. The entirety of the Gospel of John shows us what that life looks like, feels like, tastes like, smells like and sounds like. The raising of Lazarus on the last Sunday of Lent breaks our patterns so that we can

hear for ourselves what Jesus' resurrection can mean. We need to hear his interpretation of his resurrection. Otherwise we may misunderstand Easter. Easter is our promise of eternal life in the presence of Jesus and the Father; at the same time it is the daily grace of life in Jesus' abiding presence.