

John 11, Ezekiel 37, April 2017

Phil and I just returned from a really fun vacation time in Florida, along with our 25 year old son, Andrew. We were in the Tampa area, which is colorful and entertaining in itself, but we also went to Universal Studios in Orlando for a day, with the intention of experiencing the world of Harry Potter. Both our kids grew up with Harry Potter, so to speak, and so Phil and I are also reasonably well versed in the stories. Going to Harry Potter world was expensive, busy, and high energy, but I tell you what: it was worth it! Every bit! The experience was, as it should be—absolutely magical. The recreation of Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade and Hogswart is stunning and all encompassing. Our son had the goal of buying a souvenir wand, and wands are sold throughout the park, but the most popular place to purchase one is Olivander's, where Harry buys his wand in the books. These souvenir wands are rather pricey, intricate, and varied: there's probably 2-3 dozen different styles, each named with the character who used it in the books; so you can get Snape's wand, or Harry's wand, or Hermionie's wand, and so on, and they're each distinct. For an extra \$6, you may obtain the same wand with a digital component. With that feature, you can use your wand throughout various stations in the Harry Potter world and make magical things happen; we'd see a child wave their wand in front of a fountain, and it would spout water; or they'd wave it next to a shop window, and the figure within would come to life and move, and so on. It was great! It was magic! Magic, in the world of literature and human imagination, means utilizing a particular, specialized object (like a wand) in a particular, ritualistic way (like a spell) in order to make something unexpected or even unbelievable happen. You raise the wand, you say the spell, and zing***stuff

happens! I love the Harry Potter books and appreciated the magic therein, but essentially, of course—it's fiction. It's make believe. That's what it's intended to be.

In our lesson today, there is also stuff happening. Unexpected stuff. Unbelievable stuff. It's *not* magic, though is it? In the Gospel lesson, where Lazarus is restored to life, there is *no* magic wand; *no* ritualistic act, *no* digital effects. It's *not* magical. On the other hand, it's not *make believe*, either. It's *not intended* to be fiction. It's real. The raising of Lazarus is offered to us from John's Gospel as the motivating final straw that led the authorities to seek Christ's execution. That's in the verses that follow the lesson we have before us, which I'm sure you agree was long enough as it was! But, the raising of Lazarus is not intended to be magic, make believe, or metaphor--- it is presented as an actual, historical occurrence that led to a chain of historical and political events that leads to Christ's death and resurrection. This story, which deals with bridging that chasm between death and life, involves no magical wand or spell, but rather *this* factor: the presence, power and Word of God.

There are a number of things about this story of Lazarus that might cause us confusion. Why does Jesus wait to come? How is this miracle accomplished? And why, if this is a story about Lazarus, do we actually hear virtually nothing of him? There are two stories in Scripture where we might learn about Lazarus, but both also include his sisters, Mary and Martha, and they always get all the good lines. The two stories that deal with these three are Jesus' visit to their home in Bethany, where we learn about the two styles of Mary and Martha. As you recall, Martha is busy and stressed out, trying to get a nice meal ready for Jesus, and she vents her irritation with her sister, Mary, who is sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to him, instead of helping Martha. Martha, we conclude, is

more practical, and Mary is more contemplative. Lazarus isn't even mentioned in this story at all, it's as though he wasn't even there.

Now, in today's text we have this set of sisters and their brother again. And again, Lazarus has the least demanding role. In fact, Lazarus never says a word throughout the text. His role seems to be entirely passive. He's ill, and it's the sisters who are active, tending to him and sending word to Jesus. Then he's dead, and it's his sisters who are active, performing the traditional burial rituals and wondering why Jesus didn't come to their aid. Even after he's raised, Lazarus speaks not a word. He comes out of the tomb, still bound in his strips of cloth from burial, and again, it's the sisters who are instructed to do something—to unbind him and let him go. It's Mary and Martha who have the spotlight in this story, and they maintain the characteristic qualities that we saw in them before. The two sisters are in a state of mourning in their home when they hear Jesus is coming---finally---now that it's too late. Who bustles out to go and greet him as courtesy demands? Martha, of course, the busy and practical sister. In the housekeeping story I mentioned before, Martha was not shy about telling Jesus what to do---she tells him to berate her sister for leaving her to do all the work. We see this same honest boldness in her encounter with Jesus now. Her first words appear to be words of grief and quite possibly anger--“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” How's that for inducing guilt? Her comments spur a theological discussion during which Jesus says words that we continue to hear at funeral services about 2,000 years later: “I am the resurrection and the life.” Martha affirms her faith in Jesus as the Christ, even in the face of her brother's death. Practical, bold and faith-filled Martha.

Mary gets up to see Jesus only when Martha tells her that he's asking for her. Like Martha, Mary's first words are the same words of grief and anger—"If you had been here, my brother would not have died." But these words, coming from the gentler Mary, have a different impact on Jesus than they did when they came from Martha. Seeing Mary's grief and tears, Jesus has no words, but instead sheds his own tears. And like most people who love someone and learn that they've died---Jesus wants to see the body of his dear friend. All those who accompany him to the tomb of Lazarus, assume that he's referring to seeing the *tomb*, of course, not the actual *body*. The body, dead now for four days, will have a stench that would turn anyone's stomach. And when Jesus asks to actually enter the tomb to see the body, the ever-practical Martha reminds him of this grim reality---"Not a good idea, Lord, he's going to smell something awful". Undeterred, Jesus enters the tomb, prays, and then issues a command—"Lazarus, come out!" No magic wand. No sleight of hand. No ritualistic spell. Just the presence, power, and Word of God. "Lazarus, come out!" And in defiance of every death in human history and everything that anyone has ever known about death, dead ears hear. Lazarus hears and responds to the command. The dead man gets up and comes out, his only real action in the story, and is then released---both from death and from the cloth bindings that had held him there. We don't know what, if anything, he said. We don't know what his life was like after that. What's it like to return to life after being dead? Typical of his treatment in the Scriptures, we never hear of him again. All we know of him is that he's Lazarus, and that he is living proof that the presence, power and word of God can bridge the chasm between death and life.

This lesson, although neither make believe nor magical, may seem to be as far distant from us as Diagon Alley and Harry Potter world, because it is so *completely* counter intuitive. We are so much more familiar and comfortable with the reality that the dead stay dead, the used up stay used up, the broken remains broken, the end is the end, and the past determines the present and the future. To suggest otherwise seems as far fetched as expecting your magic wand to produce real results outside of Harry Potter World. We are generally on fairly intimate terms with pessimism and fatalism. In our quest to be realistic, we often assume the worst. You know how some people seem to delight in being prophets of doom and harbingers of gloom? Sometimes we are those people. We're sure that someone or something is doomed, broken, dead, and done. And to think otherwise would be ridiculous. That guy over there will never stop drinking. That kid over there will never amount to anything. That woman we know will never get past her past. That situation or that person will never change or show signs of life. How quickly and easily we sometimes diagnose gloom, doom, and death. The good news is that we can be wrong. Lazarus demonstrates that. Dead ears can hear. Tombs can be opened. There is something that can bridge the chasm between death and life. That something is God's presence, power, and Word. "Lazarus, come out", Jesus commanded, and he did. Not magic. But the power of God to bring life out of death.

This story is a little foretaste of Easter, isn't it? In some ways, it seems strange to be speaking of resurrection or new life now, in the depths of Lent, and before Jesus is even arrested, much less crucified or raised. But again, this incident, in the Gospel of John, is what sets into motion the plan to have Jesus killed. Because the Roman authorities and the Jewish leaders could bear quite a lot, but *this* they could not bear: God

bridging the chasm between death and life. In the same way it causes us doubt and disbelief, it completely unhinged the status quo of their operations, and they would not stand for it. They could not welcome the idea, because it threatened too much of their own entrenched philosophy of brokenness, endings, and death having the final word. We are likely equally entrenched in that very human perspective, but maybe this story points us towards an attitude that can shape our approach to Easter: an attitude that looks for the ways God brings life out of death, beginnings out of endings, new hope out of the old and used up. Not through magic, but through God's presence, power, and Word. Let's spend these last two weeks of Lent looking about us for signs of just this: that God is alive and present, and that God's powerful presence and Word bring life and hope from places where we just wouldn't expect to see it happening! In the Created world of nature. In the church. In the people around us. Maybe, even within us....God can surprise us, renew us, and bring new life. Amen.