

Was the raising of Lazarus physical or spiritual?

This was the question posed to me by a friend of mine many years ago when we were sharing stories about life in our chosen fields of study.

Was the raising of Lazarus physical or spiritual?

As soon as the words came out of his mouth, I groaned. How in the *world* was I going to answer *that* question!?

I really just wanted to order dessert.

Instead I did what good Christian theologians have done for centuries. I played the ‘mystery’ card.

“Was the raising of Lazarus physical or spiritual?” he asked.

“Yes,” I responded.

In our Teach the Preacher conversation last week, we ended up in a similar conversation. And I ended up offering a similar answer.

I promise I was not avoiding the very legitimate question of how we deal with the so-called ‘supernatural’ stories of our Scriptures, including this one about Lazarus today.

It’s just that the ‘pastor’ in me has come to know there is a deeper more personal question that matters more.

Which is whether or not the Spirit of God, in some mysterious way, can raise me, can raise you, physically, spiritually?

What I really wanted to say to my friend is how sorry I was that he was going through a messy, bitter divorce. That I had heard through the grapevine he was losing his license to practice law and had no idea where the next paycheck would come from. That I figured his life as he knew it was stinking in the tomb with Lazarus and that he was very likely sitting in front of me as one of the walking dead.

What I really wanted to say to my friend is, yes, the Spirit of God *can* raise your broken, wounded life from the dead.

Physically.

Spiritually.

The truth is, on this All Saints Sunday, that every one of us is dealing with some kind of walking death sentence. The loss of a job. The loss of a home. The loss of a spouse. The loss of a life.

And the truth is that loss hurts.

And the truth is that in a death-denying culture like ours it is not very easy to admit that loss hurts.

Except here. In the church.

In fact, I have come to believe this is the reason we have the church in the first place.

Even more than our worship, even more than what we say we believe about Jesus, even more than our mission and advocacy for social justice, the whole reason we have the church is to carve out a place in our death-denying culture where we can be honest about the truth of the pain of our loss.

Here in the church we get to be Mary and Martha pleading with Jesus, pleading with God, to come help us in our loss. To fix it! To keep it from happening in the first place. To come soon, to come NOW, to come YESTERDAY, to come, to come, to come and *make everything right!*

Here in the church we get to be Mary and Martha waiting for Jesus to come, waiting for God to arrive, telling one another that it will be okay, that Jesus will know what to do, that our world, our families, our selves will be made well.

Even when we really are not 'well.'

And here in the church we get to become Mary and Martha weeping over our dead brother, when God just does not show up the way we think God should. Weeping over the great suffering in our world, weeping over our own powerless, our own despair.

Weeping over the seeming absence of God.

Here in the church – at least in *this* church – we get to say, God, 'If you had been here my brother would never have died.'

Because the fact of the matter is that sickness and death and poverty and abuse and injustice are all around us, and there is a huge stench in this tomb, and I, for one, cannot bring myself to understand why a God who can work miracles is allowing such suffering to continue.

And here in the church – at least in *this* church – we get to say that. And God can take it. Because God knows it is the truth of how we really feel.

And then this amazing thing happens here in the church. When we say it like it is about the rotten stinking stench we have found ourselves in when God just does not show up like we think God should. This amazing thing happens here in the church when we gather with friends and, let's face it, with people we don't even know. This amazing thing happens here in the church when our loss brings us to our knees.

'Yet even now,' we find ourselves saying. 'Even now, I am sure that God will give you whatever you ask.'

Because here in the church, when Jesus sees us weeping – 'Together ... we ...' – he is troubled in spirit, right along with us.

And Jesus weeps, right along with us.

And here in the church Jesus calls into that tomb of whatever death sentence we are dealing with on this particular All Saints Sunday and says, 'Gusti! Come out of that rotten stinking tomb!

[pick others]

And once we have been called out of that rotten, stinking tomb, here in the church. Surrounded by our friends and, let's face it, people we don't even really know.

Jesus says to the crowd:

Unbind them!

And set them free.

Amen.