



SERMONS THAT WORK

Wednesday in Holy Week

Two Resurrections

[RCL]: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 70; Hebrews 12:1-3; John 13:21-32

And it was night. Wednesday in Holy Week marks an inflection point between light and dark: halfway from dusk to dawn, midway between two resurrections. Yes, two resurrections: because you cannot understand Jesus' resurrection in the Gospel of John without first knowing about Lazarus' resurrection. Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead is the catalyst that sets everything in motion this Holy Week.

And Lazarus is the mirror opposite of Judas. As Lazarus is raised from the dead and brought into the light, Judas descends further into darkness with every step, unable or unwilling to open his eyes and live in the light and truth of God's love. Tonight, we consider Lazarus versus Judas, the light versus the night. And we wait in this darkness, in this night, for the light to come. If it does — when it does — how will we react? Will we walk into the light or turn away?

To know how we got here, we have to know where we've been. It was only a few weeks before this night that Jesus had been called to Bethany by Mary and Martha. Their brother Lazarus was ill. He may have had leprosy — Bethany was built to house a colony of lepers. The village of Bethany was just outside of Jerusalem, just out of sight of the temple, in fact. The name Bethany translates to something like “the house of affliction.” It was where the city of Jerusalem sent people who were poor or sick. Bethany was built out of sight of the temple so those coming into the city to worship wouldn't have to see all that ugliness, that poverty and desperation.

All in all, not a very nice place. But Bethany is where Jesus chose to spend much of his time, in the house of his friends Mary and Martha and Lazarus. He got the sisters' message about Lazarus' illness but didn't arrive in time to heal him. By the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus has been dead four days. Martha is upset, of course, and this causes Jesus to be upset. He weeps, standing before the darkened tomb. John tells the story this way:

“It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.’”

Jesus called into the darkness: “‘Lazarus, come out!’ 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.’”

The meaning of Easter isn’t contained in just one resurrection. In John’s Gospel, the struggle between light and dark — what we are living through during this Holy Week — is framed by two resurrections: first Lazarus, then Jesus. Jesus’ raising of Lazarus is the catalyst that sets in motion everything that happens in Holy Week. News of the miracle spreads and brings Jesus many new followers — and it’s these new converts who all turn out with palm branches to honor Jesus as he enters Jerusalem at the beginning of Passover week. These crowds bring Jesus to the attention of the temple authorities, and eventually the Roman governor.

The night before that Palm Sunday demonstration, the newly raised Lazarus hosted a gathering for Jesus in Bethany. Although Jesus raising Lazarus was astounding, the idea of resurrection was not entirely unheard of. In fact, Martha is exasperated with Jesus when he first tells her that Lazarus will rise again— “I know, I know,” she says, “at the last day,” as if to say, “of course he will live again — we all will.” For John, the point of Jesus’ resurrection is not to impress on us how utterly unique Jesus is. John has other ways of making that point. In John’s Gospel, the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection is wrapped up with Lazarus’: the point is that resurrection life starts now, and is meant for everybody.

John’s other point is that resurrection always means the resurrection of the *body*. Bodies matter in the Gospel of John. When Jesus is standing outside Lazarus’ tomb, Martha and Mary are careful to warn him that the corpse is four days old, so of course, there will be a stench. And at the gathering on the night before Palm Sunday, Mary anoints Jesus’ feet with a pound of costly perfume, and then wipes his feet with her hair: you can’t get more embodied than that. John emphasizes bodies in order to insist that resurrection life starts now, while we still have bodies. The life of God’s Kingdom begins in the here and now, and is meant to bring healing, comfort, and succor to all those whose bodies are suffering in this present age — especially the poor.

But Judas couldn’t see this. His mind was in darkness: he couldn’t see the meaning of Mary’s anointing, and he objected to the extravagance, and accused Jesus of not caring about the poor. The darkness continued to grow in Judas all that week: while he watched the eager crowds grow, and the temple authorities struggle to contain them. Judas was quick to assume the worst about Jesus, to ascribe bad motives to every action, while he watched Jesus’ open conflict with the authorities grow. At the same time, Judas was blind to his own faults, all the ways in which he failed to live up to the trust that Jesus and the other disciples placed in him.

Finally, on Thursday night, the darkness overwhelms Judas. For although today is Wednesday, the conflict between Judas and Jesus we heard in the Gospel reading takes place on Thursday, the night before the Passover, just after Jesus has washed the disciples’ feet. This selfless act of embodied love is too much for Judas to take. It’s too much love; it’s too much light. It hurts his eyes and burns into his mind. If Judas

had stayed, perhaps the light and the love could have healed him. But the pain is too great, and he flees into the darkness and the night.

Friends, Jesus is calling us out of the dark and into the light, just as he called Lazarus. Even though there is darkness all around, God's light still abides. Come out of your dark tomb. Whatever shame is in your heart, whatever guilt you carry, however dead you feel, nothing you have done or ever could do can separate you from the love of God. Come into the light, even if it hurts your eyes. Come into the light, even if it blinds you at first. Come into the truth. Walk in the light of God's love. Take a deep breath and live the new life, the resurrection life that God is giving you today.

Amen.

The Rev. Jason Cox serves as Senior Associate Rector at St. Columba's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. Prior to working at St. Columba's, he directed the Episcopal Urban Intern Program (now Jubilee Year LA), an Episcopal Service Corps program for young adults in the Diocese of Los Angeles. Before ordination, he served as an intern with EUIP, working with the homeless in a transitional housing facility on L.A.'s skid row.