

“Raising Cain (and Lazarus)”

John 11: 1-6, 17-26, 34-35, 41-44

An elderly British divine of great stature and influence went to hear one of his students preach. In an attempt to wake up his congregation the student, while preaching, said, “I have a confession to make to you this morning. For seventeen years, I lived with a woman who was not my wife!” A hush fell over the congregation, save for a few audible gasps. Then the preacher said, “She was my mother!”, and everyone chuckled in relief. The elderly minister was so impressed by the reaction his student elicited from the congregation that the next time he was preaching, when he noticed people nodding off, he stopped abruptly and said, “I have a confession to make to you this morning. For seventeen years I lived with a woman who was not my wife!” The congregation fell into shocked silence. As the uncomfortable silence extended, the minister finally said, “I can’t, for the life of me, remember who she was!”

Well, for seventeen years, I lived with a mother for whom the worst sin in the world was “lollygagging”. My mother was the embodiment of the Protestant work ethic and she had little time for anyone who dawdled or dallied – “wasting their time”. If you had something to do, get about doing! If I ran to the grocery store to get a loaf of bread, it was with the words ringing in my ears, “Don’t lollygag!” In my mother’s theology, it was “busyness” which is next to Godliness! Consequently, I was forty-five years old before I learned that lollygagging is one the most fulfilling experiences that this life offers us. I have since made up for lost time. But lollygagging is an art- a very difficult art for many of us. Most of us have trouble just “being” instead of “doing”. The late British novelist Susan Ertz noted the irony of millions who long for immortality when they don’t know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon! They don’t know how to lollygag!

So, for some of us, the most shocking thing about John’s story of the raising of Lazarus is that when Lazarus’ sisters, Mary and Martha, sent a messenger to Jesus to let him know that his friend, Lazarus, was ill, instead of getting there as fast as he could, Jesus lollygagged! John says, “Though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.” It’s not surprising that when Jesus does get there, he is met by a disappointed and angry Martha and Mary, who each say in turn, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” (I wonder if they asked, “Have you been lollygagging?” And who could blame them?)

Do you know the movie, Shadowlands? It’s the true-to-life story of C.S. Lewis, who goes by his nickname, Jack, and his love for his wife, Joy Gresham. When they meet, Jack is a reserved, uptight Oxford Professor and confirmed bachelor, best known as an apologist for Christian orthodoxy. She is an American poet who is separated from her husband and traveling in England with her son. From the beginning, Joy loves Jack. But though he is her friend, Jack is slow and scared. At one point, they get legally married so Joy won’t have to leave England, but they live miles apart and are married in name only.

But then, when Joy develops cancer, Jack realized how deeply he loves her. At his insistence they have another wedding in her hospital room; this time with a ring and the blessing of the church. Joy demonstrates tremendous courage in the face of her illness and fights to live as long as she can with Jack. During a remission, they take a car trip to “Golden Valley”, a place known to Jack from a picture on the wall of his room from childhood and which he had dreamed of visiting since he was a boy. Once Joy and Jack arrive at Golden Valley, they go for a walk, and when a rain shower comes, they find shelter in a barn looking out over the valley. Jack says to Joy, “I no longer want what’s around the curve, over the hill. I’m here.” She replies, “It’s your kind of happiness.” “Yes” “It won’t last, you know.” “Don’t talk about that,” he pleads. Then with such tender insight and trust as brings tears to our eyes, Joy says, “I want to be with you at the end, too. I can’t unless I talk about it now. The pain then is part of the happiness now.”

What Joy says to her “Dear Jack” hints at bringing two worlds together- the world of then, and the world of now. And remember that the movie is called Shadowlands because C.S. Lewis said ours is a world of shadows not because it is so chock full of death and darkness, but because there are reflections in it of an eternal world whose light is always breaking in on us here and there!

The great English poet, John Donne, put it in a memorable way, which is especially appropriate for this Contata Sunday: “Since I am coming to that holy room, where with the choir of saints forevermore, I shall be made thy music; as I come I tune the instrument here at the door, and what I must do then, think here before.” (Did you catch that? It’s an image of cocking an ear to another world impinging on this one; and tuning our life to that new reality). John’s story of the raising of Lazarus is a “tuning the instrument” for the crescendo of Easter morning.

As a gospel, John is a little “peculiar”. Written much later than the other canonical gospels, John’s Jesus is not just the “anointed” or “Messiah” of God; rather Jesus is God. As such, some of John’s stories strain credibility if taken literally. The brilliant Egyptian teacher, Origen, who lived in the early third century, and became one of John’s earliest defenders said of John, “Although he does not always tell the truth literally, he always tells the truth spiritually.” So did Lazarus, with shroud unwinding, walk out of his grave? I doubt it. But I know that the Living Christ frees us from tombs of our own making- from “sin and death” in this life and the next! And the wonderful thing about John’s theology is that he brings those two worlds –then and now together. That is, the “resurrection of the dead” is not just something that will happen in the future. When Jesus consoles his friends, Mary and Martha on the death of their brother, Martha voices the traditional hope of the pious, saying, “I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day.” But Jesus says, “You don’t have to wait for the last day. I am the resurrection and the life!” In John’s theology, Jesus is the fulfillment of that which he proclaims, (“realized eschatology”) Jesus comes proclaiming “eternal life” which doesn’t begin after death, but begins now, when we “die to sin” (frees us from our addictions to power and wealth) and, like Lazarus, are raised to newness of life.

So why does John have Jesus lollygagging instead of getting there before Lazarus died? Well, because, as St. Francis puts it, “only where there are deaths are there resurrections”, for one thing. But, additionally, whereas in the other gospels, the “incident in the temple” (“cleansing of the temple”) is the event that precipitates the crucifixion of Jesus, in John, it is the raising of Lazarus. The raising of Lazarus so alarms the religious authorities that they determined not only to kill Jesus, but they planned to put Lazarus to death as well. The charge would be “blasphemy” usurping the place of God- for only God can give life to the dead.

So why was Jesus crucified? One suspects that Mark, Matthew and Luke are closer to the historical reality, and it was because this Galilean itinerant preacher was “raising Cain” everywhere and especially in the temple courtyard. But surely one aspect of that raising Cain was giving new life to folks like Lazarus, and you and me. Because when anyone in “the system” experiences new life, they break out of the system and threaten the status quo. And that leads to a cross. But by the time John writes, even though the cross was still an instrument of a torturous death, it was understood as a life-giving gift, or an occasion for the “glorification” of Christ and God. “Glorification” has become a code-word for crucifixion. So when John’s Jesus hears of his friend’s illness, he says to his disciples: “This illness is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” That is, no need to be in a hurry; let’s lollygag on the way to the crucifixion and the resurrection!