

“God’s Part—the Bethany Incident”
 Sermon for Palm Sunday 2017
 Text: John 12:12-19

Not so long ago there was some controversy about the crowd size surrounding the inauguration of our sitting president and the numbers varied immensely depending on whom you listened to. The expectation of the Messiah’s coming being very high, King Agrippa sought to get some idea of this “crowded passover.” John Gill wrote:

King Agrippa sought to know what was the number of the multitude, which were in Jerusalem; he said to the priests, lay by for me one kidney of every passover lamb; they laid by for him six hundred thousand pair of kidneys, double the number of those that came out of Egypt: and there is never a passover lamb, but there are more than ten numbered for it (m), &c.”

If we do the math, six hundred pairs of kidneys translates into six million attendant Jews. According to Gill’s source: this number represents half of those that came out of Egypt with Moses. That is staggering. The logistics of managing such a influx of visitors (from all parts of the nation—“all theses in Israel were obliged to appear at this time”—and from those dispersed around the known world) are overwhelming. There probably weren’t enough Roman soldiers in the entire Roman army to properly police a demonstration of this magnitude. *It is no wonder that the leaders of the Jews were anxious and, as it were, afraid of the people!* As we ponder the numbers, behind the phrase **much people** (v.12), when we populate that crowd in the millions, certain facts about the gospel account of Jesus’ passion, beginning with the triumphal entry, take on particular color and shape.

Here’s one: religious populism. The “business as usual” surrounding the temple rites and rituals around Passover simply disappeared—if everything was to happen in order and on time, the priests would be operating on screech! Extra lines and lengthier hours of access to the temple itself would have to be established. *It would simply be impossible for such a number to obtain temple access—which the Law already allowed for. Thousands of families would celebrate private ceremonies in the acreage surrounding the holy city.* Consider the volume of business in the Jerusalem markets! Off the charts. Vendors would line the streets coming into the city and compete for prime locations everywhere. Population density, sanitary concerns, the supply of potable water . . . I think we get the picture. Jesus’ retirement to Bethany, the place where he lodged prior to the demonstration, makes real sense. In fact, the whole region between the two cities would have been filled to the brim with fervent, expectant pilgrims—all there to see if the Messiah would come as prophesied this year! Hope for deliverance from foreign dominion both Gentiel and Roman beat fiercely in many Jewish hearts!

Still Bethany is the scene of a very great miracle (the raising of Lazarus from the dead). That miracle, glossed over by the first three gospels known as the synoptics, was both incendiary and provocative. John’s decision to relate this event in full fits with John’s “fill in the gaps” choices generally. More details are gleanable from the works of Josephus, Tacitus, other Roman historians and rabbinic sources.

The fact that this crowd was so demonstrably patriotic and that the fake news of the religious leadership so effective may account for the omission of this incident from the Synoptics. At least two other resurrections by Jesus preceded this one were recorded elsewhere so that Jesus' authority over the dead was undisputed but John, being Jewish himself, decided to share the sense of the moment and the magnitude of this event with us.

Let's start with "the provocation" by Jesus because in the setting of this vast "demonstration" (the Passover observances) what Jesus did could not help but be incendiary. We noted already that Temple Inc. was on screech. In addition to the six million Jews, there were six hundred thousand lambs to be housed, examined and then processed for sacrifice. Thousands upon thousands of priests would have to be conscripted just to address this extraordinary ritual demand. This was certainly no time for Jesus to purge the temple and drive out the money-changers! Those actions by Jesus had to be, from the perspective of the Sadducees, taken as a deliberate affront, an act of sabotage and social/religious and political disruption. They would consider it blasphemous. Now the chief priests were of this party of liberal, wealthy Jews, a sect, or faction and, doctrinally, *they denied the resurrection—along with angels, the last judgment and even a literal hell*. Of all the miracles for Jesus to perpetrate at that moment, a conspicuous demonstration of His power over death *by raising Lazarus from the dead* would be seen as a calculated, revolutionary/radical act. Incendiary.

While it wasn't rioting, looting and the destruction of property, Jesus' publicly verifiable miracle in Bethany, *the Bethany Incident*, was a game changer. With the resurrection of Lazarus, Jesus became the center of attention and a rival authority figure to the chief priests. Those among the Pharisees, who opposed Jesus, had decreed that any who believed on, or followed him were to **be put out of the synagogues**—actually demonstrating the futility of religious suppression/persecution!—were now pushed aside by the chief priests and Sadducees. The efforts to delegitimize Jesus had failed! These provoked leaders formulated deliberate plans to criminalize and get rid of Jesus: to arrest, try and execute him. *After all they didn't just own the court, they were the court!* **You know nothing at all!** fumed Caiaphas, **You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.** (John 11:49-50)

Caiaphas' murderous resolve accorded well with the ruling class's feeling endangered along with the risk caused by the demonstration. It was an evil counsel, one of desperation—these dynamics are all too familiar to those of us who have studied the psychology of those who are ensconced in power, who wish to stay there. **At all costs**. The "religious establishment," an envelope that could contain both the opposing Pharisees and these Sadducees, working with the Romans (collaborationists) to maintain the status quo would also have kept a wary eye on those Jews known as Zealots, the radically nationalist Jews who would love to incite insurrection and were politically opportunistic. This crowd of Jews in Jerusalem represented a prime occasion to stir things up and so attract adverse Roman attention: **Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.** (John vv.47-48)

More directly, to the point of this message, what was it about the Bethany incident, that we should take note of? What is Jesus teaching us about sin and death through resurrection? His exchange with Martha is marvelous. It starts off sounding like a reproof by her of him: **Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Now we come to the God part! But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.** (v. 21)

It seems to me that she thinks that Jesus wants for Lazarus what she wants for Lazarus: that he be alive, not dead. This is a very human response. Totally understandable in that way. However, Jesus' response is oblique: **Your brother will rise again.**

Sin being dominant in her thinking as it may be in ours, Martha understands neither death, nor resurrection. And ignorant of such, she represents the predicament of all sinners, of all times, including the Pharisees and Sadducees holding council meetings a mere two miles away in Jerusalem. So Martha processes this **rise again** as best she can: **I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.** (v.24) True, he will. She has her end times theology in place but correct theology about the end times isn't exactly helping her right now. Jesus has something more mind-blowing and immediate in view.

Jesus declares next, **I am the resurrection and the life.** For whom? For her? For her deceased brother? For you and me? Yes, all of the above. Death is comparatively not important. I am. Death is not king, I am. I am the abolition of death, the end of death, and the destruction of death is why I have come for. **Do you believe this?** Because if you believe this, death shall have no dominion over you at all. **He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.** (v.25) I repeat, now this is a game changer. This alters everything because everything I think about life, death and what is to come is necessarily filtered through this affirmation: **He who believes in me will live.** That is, he will truly live by virtue of believing in me, now and forever!

*How pointless it would be to kill such a one! **And whoever lives and believes in me will never die.*** (v.26) This is, as Jesus affirms, eternal life. Do you believe it? You, seated in the pews, here, today? Do you have eternal life? I fear that too many of us haven't, we haven't even thought about it. Eternal life is what comes to you, is what becomes yours the moment you live and believe in Jesus. That is why we come to worship, we have heard and come to believe that Jesus is **the resurrection and the life.** **"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who has come into the world."** (v.27) *I do not know of any higher view of who the Lord Jesus is than this which is confessed by Martha.*

And if I were to say, right now, that this confession, and not just the revivification of a corpse, not even the calling of a dead man out of the tomb by name(!) with power, and not even the summoning of the dead back to human mortality, that this is the incident at Bethany, would you concur?

Jesus said, remember, **This sickness will not end in death.** And it certainly did not! **No, it is truly for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.** (11:4) Through what? Through the sickness, and the dying and the death. Because things are not as they appear to be; rather they are **as He says they are.** So the death and burial of Lazarus did not end in death, but in a resurrection! Lazarus became a living, walking and talking testimony to the glory of God, the power of God, to the death defying presence of the Son of God in our midst! *Everyone was talking about it—friends and foes. Gawkers and gossippers.* The news of it, the reality of it, the marvel of it spread abroad—it permeated the crowds! And that is what terrified the authorities! Although Jesus did not move about as freely as he had previously, when he was with the people, the “temple police” did not dare arrest him, nor did those who would betray him attempt any such thing—**they feared the people!** It was not their hour.

Through sin, death had come to hold inordinate power in the minds and the imagination of everyone in the circle of the life of Lazarus. But that is no longer true for Martha, no longer true for you and me. However for the religious establishment, the power brokers in Jerusalem, a judicial death seemed to retain some usefulness. If only they could kill Jesus, they thought they could stay in control, stay in power. Well, as we know, they did kill Jesus, but they did not stay in control—for it is God who is truly in power all along—over all events in Bethany and all the events in Jerusalem as well as all the events in your life and mine. It is because of this inordinate power of death over the thinking, the minds of people that Jesus was about to call Lazarus back from a far, far better existence into the plane of human mortality, suffering, sin, evil, darkness and, a second “natural” death.

Lazarus was obedient and, with considerable sacrifice, obeyed the summons of His Lord. Mary was weeping, and the Jews with her were also weeping—totally absorbed in their emotions of loss and grieving. But He, who is the **resurrection and the life** had something quite different for them to consider! Then, in terms descriptive more consistent with deliverance, with demonic conflict and exorcism, Jesus, **deeply moved in spirit and troubled,** takes charge at stage center. Jesus vented his divine fury at death as an intrusive, unwelcome enemy! *It will never do to reduce the Greek here to something pallid like sympathy, or even passionate empathy—Jesus was way past pity!* He evoked judgment on death, directing and expelling it with his Word. Once more, deeply moved, **Jesus came to the tomb.**

With revulsion and recoil behind every syllable, Martha remonstrates, **But, Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been there four days!** We spoke of the overpoweringly bad odor before. Jesus replies, **Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?!** I take it that Jesus said this as the people were removing the stone, covering the cave's entrance—it was not a dug grave, or a pit grave! It was very like the grave in which Jesus' body would be laid shortly. And through the fumes of corrupting flesh, Jesus prayed, *in the hearing of all,* a prayer that cemented his relationship to God the Father, expressed his identity as God's Son, **for the benefit of those standing here that they may believe that you sent me.** (v.42)—all in their hearing and presence! Then, **Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”** (or come forth) **The dead man came out.**

See the glory of God! Dead men don't do that! Dead men don't do anything. They don't respond to a summons, or propel themselves forward. Lazarus got up and emerged from the tomb *without any human assurance*. And as if to make this miracle the more remarkable Lazarus came forth, **his hands and feet wrapped in strips of linen**. No, I do not have any natural explanation. But Jesus' next command to them was: **Take off the grave clothes and let him go.** (v. 44) That is natural enough. Remove what he has no more need for, release him. We must assume that he walked home, got a fresh set of clothes—perhaps some one lent him an outer robe for the journey—and set about re-entering life as lived in Bethany. And, as he ate, drank and slept, those who saw “the miracle man” were filled with wonder and awe. Of course, he was evidence of the glory of God which they had all seen *for themselves*.

Now that is one powerful refutation of false doctrine! The false doctrine of the Sadducees, the ones who oversaw the temple and the rite of sacrifice performed there, was demolished by the facts. Many Jews came to believe in Jesus as a result of these things, rejoicing, magnifying and praising God. Some did not. Indeed, this notable miracle led the Sanhedrin to pursue a course of murder. No debate. No changing of minds. Just murder. . . for the public good, of course. The same demonic rationale that undergirds persecution, the killing of dissidents and the assassination of political opponents in many progressive, socialist regimes across the globe. The leadership hated Jesus and feared change so they plotted to eliminate what they could not co-opt. They wanted, most of all, to stay in power, to enjoy privilege and control the wealth. Sounds very familiar.

Now we know that there is life after death. Now we know that death is not the end and that the glory of God is, or should be our primary concern in every circumstances and condition of life. Scripture does not tell us if Lazarus was actually killed or not—I think that it was likely that he was. But I also know that that killing would have been senseless. *The damage had already been done:* to death, to the false doctrine of those who believe there is no resurrection life and to some of our own preconceptions about life, death and resurrection. Hopefully, this account of what Jesus did prior to his triumphal entry, and the circumstances which surrounded that great miracle will provide a framework for your Easter celebration—as we join together to follow his footsteps to death and beyond.

Amen