



FROM DEATH TO LIFE

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT reads the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, John 11:37-45, from an ecological perspective.

We will read excerpts from John 11 on the last Sunday of the Lenten journey, the Sunday before Palm Sunday. And the key themes of Lazarus's death and raising to life will be played out even more vividly in the drama of Jesus's death and resurrection read during Passion Week.

I'm reminded when reading with an ecological perspective that the human and divine drama in the Scriptures is played out in an other-than-human context. By attending to this context we develop the capacity to read the ecological aspects of the text.

The Intimate Circle

The opening verses set the relationships of the characters in an intimate setting. First Martha and Mary are named as "sisters" and together they send a message to Jesus alerting him to their brother Lazarus's illness — named by them as "the one you love". The Johannine narrator makes the circle of intimacy explicit: "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (Jn 11:5). As ecological readers we take note of this intimacy as a significant element of all relationships in the communion of the planet when they are rightly ordered and of the circles of intimacy in our lives.

Jesus Delays

In the narrative, Jesus seems to do the unexpected in the face of the seriousness of Lazarus's condition and their relationship. Jesus stays "in an unknown place for two days". These two key ecological elements, time and place, hold him. The narrator does not explain further. This obscurity can remind us that time and place are at the heart of the unfolding of our lives and our ecological awareness.

Arriving After the Funeral

We attend to the materiality evident in the text. First, we learn that Jesus arrives in Bethany, a village – where the material and social intertwine. Bethany is a small village on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives. We read that the people are grappling with the death of a beloved member of the community. Jesus hears that Lazarus was buried in his earthen tomb four days earlier. Many mourners are coming from Jerusalem to comfort Martha and Mary (these few verses are rich in both materiality and sociality – the fabric of life).

Exchange with Martha

Martha goes out to meet Jesus and their engagement unfolds on a range of levels – as we will know from our own encounters with the death of loved ones. At first Martha seems to challenge Jesus: "If you had been here Lazarus would not have died – but even now you can ask God for his life". Even within her words there is hope. She recognises death as one of the limitations on human life, as well as hope in what is even stronger than death.

The exchange between Martha and Jesus can draw us to reflect on the relationships between life and death in the human community. Earth, itself, makes a space for and holds the profundity of what is unfolding in the encounter in this Gospel.

The human encounter between Martha and Jesus deepens as Jesus invites Martha to consider the possibility of a return to life: a resurrection. Martha believes that resurrection belongs to the "last day" – it is a time factor. Jesus expands her consciousness of time and of place and space with: "I am the resurrection and the life" (Jn 11:25).

Jesus's profound invitation is at a specific time – Jesus's arrival in Bethany in response to word of Lazarus's illness – and in a specific place – at the house of Martha, Mary and Lazarus in Bethany. Even so, Jesus's words shatter the boundaries of time and space and even life itself, as we know them: "If anyone believes in me, even though they die they will live. And whoever lives and believes in me they will never die" (Jn 11:25-26).

And for Us Today

Jesus's proclamation and invitation into life is addressed to Martha in the Johannine text. However, we hear the invitation today in a broader ecological framework. We might trace the way Jesus's claim to be resurrection and life, first heard by Martha, became a foundational belief of the community of faith through the ages. We can think of that belief being for the human community and also the Earth community.

Following the theological engagement between Jesus and Martha, the narrator returns readers to the situation at hand. Jesus is said to be in great distress and with a deep sigh asks where Lazarus has been laid. Material and social elements play within this narrative as the crowd interprets Jesus's emotional response: "See how much he loved him" (Jn 11:36). Others asked: "Why couldn't he have prevented Lazarus' death?" (Jn 11:37).

The narrator describes a typical tomb of first-century Jerusalem – a cave with a stone to close the entrance. The crowd, which has come to sympathise with Martha and Mary, has gathered at the tomb and Martha brings Jesus there. Death is symbolised by the stone firmly closing the mouth of the cave. Jesus instructs that they take the stone away. Then after praying, he calls Lazarus to come out of the grave.

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In these actions Jesus enacts the resurrection that he had spoken of earlier with Martha. The resurrection of Lazarus takes place in the material of a cave and rock and stone.

Jesus's final words are significant and powerful when read ecologically. Lazarus's feet and hands are bound with "bands of stuff" and a cloth is around his face. Jesus commands: "Unbind him and let him go free" (Jn 11:44). In this powerful climax Lazarus is restored to human life.

The narrative provides us with a challenge: can we as human community unbind all that our human-centred way of life has bound up in the other-than-human world? Can we change our way of living so that we recognise flora and fauna, animal and mineral as related to us and we to them in the Earth community? Maybe we can find death and resurrection narratives of our day – eg, species saved from extinction by efforts to restore their habitats; movements to curtail the proliferation of plastics in our waterways; contemplative practices that make us appreciate and reverence other life.

As we move towards Easter we can reflect on the deep meaning of Jesus's words: "I am the resurrection and the life" and practise them in our own discipleship. ☺

Painting: *The Raising of Lazarus* by Giotto di Bondone
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