

Fifth Sunday in Lent + April 2, 2017
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI
John 11:1-45

Nancy Raabe, Pastor

[Slide 1: Tomb in Bethany]

The world of Biblical art is an incomparably rich one. Down through the ages, great painters have yearned and strived to communicate the truth of stories from Holy Scripture as they understood and interpreted them. The account we just heard of the raising of Lazarus is particularly rich in this way, not only because it is the culminating miracle of Jesus' earthly ministry, but also because it is the direct cause of Jesus' death. Immediately after this reading in John's gospel, a council of the Sanhedrin, or judges, convenes in which they decide that, because of what he has just done, Jesus must be put to death.

So I wanted to share a dozen of these paintings with you, spanning 1,000 years, as an opportunity for each of us to imagine where we see ourselves in this story and how it is speaking to us. Themes I invite you ponder, as we look at each of these paintings, include the contrasting roles of Mary and Martha; the reactions of the bystanders, both to the miracle and to Jesus; the response or depiction of Lazarus himself; which characters are included and which are left out; and the particular moment that each artist chooses to depict. Who are you? What do you connect with, out of your own experience? And after we've seen them all, where do you see yourself in the entirety of the story?

[Slide 2, William Blake]

In English painter William Blake's ecstatic representation, we are drawn into the deep mystery of the miracle. Jesus is depicted as a mystical figure bathed in and emerging from bright white light. He is in the midst of speaking the words "Lazarus, come out!", and the formerly dead man seems to

be floating up out of the earth. The bystanders on either side are either shocked or horrified, while Mary and Martha are at Jesus' feet expressing their faith and belief. Mary on the left is more serene and confident, while Martha on the right as has finally come around to believing in who Jesus really is.

[Slide 3: James Tissot]

In this painting, 19th century American artist James Tissot takes us to the place in the story where Mary went out to meet Jesus, weeping in sorrow. Jesus weeps with her and the others, one of the most powerfully emotional moments anywhere in the Bible. Jesus weeps at the thought of his beloved Lazarus in the tomb, a very human expression of the deep way he loves each of us.

[Slide 4: English psalter]

We don't see Lazarus at all in this amazingly expressive illumination from a 12th century English psalm book, only the outer edge of his grave clothes. Jesus is not only in the midst of saying "Unbind him," but has begun to pull the strips of cloth off himself. Our focus is on the intensity of the various facial expressions—Jesus' in the enormity of the miracle and all it required of him; on Mary and Martha as adoring believers, and the bystanders' astonishment and disbelief.

[Slide 5: Contemporary Russian icon]

In this modern-day icon, this time we don't see *Jesus* at all except for his hand, bidding Lazarus to be unbound. Lazarus' head is turned sideways, perhaps in response to Jesus' call, and in his face he looks fully revived and restored. Mary and Martha are at his feet and there are two bystanders—one who is shocked and covering her mouth from the stench, and the other a willing helper who is agreeably doing Jesus' bidding and about to pull the strips of cloth off.

[Slide 6: 13th c. illumination]

This 13th century manuscript illumination shows what could have been Lazarus' first response to Jesus' call, sitting up in a kind of automatic way. You can see in his face that he hasn't yet come

back to life. Mary, right above Lazarus, gazes adoringly at Jesus, while Martha right next to her is raising her hand, professing her newfound belief in Jesus. “Lord, I believe!”

[Slide 7: Henry Ossawa Tanner]

In this luminous painting, Lazarus is reclining in his grave. We are at the moment just after which Jesus commands Lazarus back to life. The interest here is in the varying expressions—the solemnity and sense of peace in Jesus, in Lazarus, and in the man who is gently cradling Lazarus’ head, in comparison to the wild emotions of the others—especially Mary kneeling to Jesus’ right and the man next to her, both overcome. Again, we see Martha to Jesus’ left, coming to faith at this very moment: “Lord, I believe.”

[Slide 8: 15th century Byzantine icon]

What’s interesting about this 15th century icon is the wealth of action and reaction. Jesus has just bid Lazarus come out. We see two men carrying away the stone and Lazarus, awake but still immobile. To his left is a group of skeptical bystanders who are reacting to incredible breach of cultural practice in opening a grave. The person above the grave is covering his nose from the smell. Above this skeptical group are the Sanhedrin deciding that Jesus must die. To Jesus’ left, a group, perhaps the Jews who came with Mary from Bethany, are taken aback by what is happening. Notice the faceless man to the right holding one strip of fabric, and is about to give it a pull!

[Slide 9: Giotto, 1306 century]

This version by Italy’s most famous late-medieval painter shows two people leading Lazarus out, who is not yet revived—while his eyes are open, he still has the appearance of being lifeless. The holy man to Lazarus’ right has hold of the gravecloths and is about to obey Jesus’ command to unbind him.

[Slide 10: 15th century Book of Hours]

This illumination is remarkable in being the only depiction I found of Lazarus having any human expression. Here he is fully restored, rising up out of grave, with most of the gravecloths removed—in fact, that may be the gravedigger just to the right, covering his nose—and is gazing up at Jesus with a humble, grateful, penitent expression.

[Slide 11: Rembrandt, The Raising of Lazarus]

This is by far the best-known painting on the subject. Rembrandt takes us to the moment in the cave that Lazarus re-awakens from death and rises from his tomb, as Christ calls him to do. We see both of Jesus' natures, human and divine: His very human face is filled with apprehension and triumph, and the striking use of light makes clear that divine power has been unleashed in performing the miracle, power that has the ability to bring about faith. Around Jesus we see astonished witnesses, especially the excited, brightly illuminated face of Mary.

[Slide 12: Van Gogh, "The Raising of Lazarus (after Rembrandt)"]

Van Gogh takes the Rembrandt painting as his model, focusing on the figure of Mary and her reaction to Lazarus' raising. But who is missing from this painting? [Jesus] Some say that the omission of Jesus means that we can't interpret this painting in a religious way. But I think it invites us to reflect on what life would be like in the absence of Christ, or the absence of the knowledge of Christ. Look carefully at the expression on Mary's face: Whereas she was excited and eager in the Rembrandt, here she is surprised and shocked, but somehow rather stern, not happy or smiling at all, without any of the adoration of Jesus that we saw in so many of the others. The fact is that Van Gogh famously said, "I can very well do without God both in my life and in my painting."

So without Christ, might this be our life? Observing things, being a witness to miracles, even, but not *seeing* them in the sense of spiritual sight that produces faith in Jesus, just as the blind man from last week learned to see, to believe?

So, in conclusion: Who are you?

Are you Martha, having said you believed in Jesus but didn't really mean it until you were witness to a miracle?

Are you Mary, who always believed, but who yet expressed the very human wish that Jesus could have saved her brother?

Are you one of the skeptics who frowns upon breaking culturally expected behaviors? In this story that meant not disturbing the grave of a dead person, but for us that might mean refusing to act as Christ commands us because it's so different from the way most people behave—such as freely sharing whatever you have, such as loving not only your neighbor as yourself but loving even your enemies, such as not acting selfishly and putting yourself first, such as believing that Jesus really does bring us life, now and always, and whose victory over death breaks the stranglehold that death has on our lives, one that causes us to live in fear of losing money, power and control? In a world ruled by love and not by fear, power and control don't matter anymore!

Or are you Lazarus? Are you all bound up in the clutches of death, which keeps you from living a full and free life in Christ?

If you are Lazarus, are you still in the grave, tightly bound? Or are you still asleep but just beginning to sit up, or are your eyes open but your body are still bound, or are you beginning to come out from the grave, or are you standing all the way up, freed from your bindings and gazing up at Jesus with love and gratitude?

And if you are in the process of being unbound, who is holding the edge of your gravecloths, gently tugging on them? Or are *you* that person, helping to unbind others?

AMEN.