
Before New Life--Death?

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A Sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton

Lent 5

John 11:1-45

Early in Mark Haddon's novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, we meet Christopher Boone. A fifteen year old boy with amazing mathematical gifts, he wonders how he has come to find himself in jail. The evening had not started well by any account. He has discovered the dead body of a neighbor's dog and tried to bring it back to the owner, Mrs. Shears. Rather than gratitude for the care he has shown the dog, she meets him with screams. All Christopher can do is curl up in a ball on the front yard.

Then the police come. He is encouraged. He trusts the police and believes they will bring order to the situation. But the policeman makes a mistake. He asks too many questions, too quickly. It is too much. All Christopher can do is curl up into a ball and attempt to block out the roar of the world.

Then the policeman makes another mistake. He tries to pick up Christopher, who is not able to tolerate human touch. He lashes out at the policeman and is promptly arrested for assault. Christopher finds himself waiting in jail, measuring his cell, intrigued to discover it is almost a perfect square.

Eventually he hears his father yelling at the police in the distance. Christopher tell us, "At 1:28 a.m. a policeman opens the door of the cell and tells me there is someone to see me. Father was standing in the corridor. He held out his right hand and spread his fingers out in a fan. I held up my left hand and spread my fingers out like a fan and we made our fingers and thumbs touch each other. We do this because sometimes Father wants to give me a hug, but I do not like hugging people so we do this instead, and it means that he loves me (16)."

We come to understand that Christopher's way of being has been a particular challenge for his parents. His father is the one most able to meet Christopher's rigid requirements and desperate need for order. He is able to prepare meals that are on Christopher's list of approved foods and is able to forgo touching since it so upsetting to Christopher. He has cared for him faithfully and with great love.

Sadly, Christopher's mother was unable to manage the strain of this child's special needs. After numerous fights and altercations with Christopher and his father, she decides he would be better off with his father and she leaves. It appears to be a straightforward story of who can handle the death of expectations and who cannot. Who is the hero, and who is the one who lacks strength and faith in the face of adversity.

The Raising of Lazarus can seem almost as straightforward if we read at it too quickly. We have Mary and Martha on the scene, and we get a very different picture than the gospel of Luke. There is no arguing over who is setting the table and who gets to sit at the feet of Jesus. We find the sisters united in grief and distress over the death of their brother. Any hope the sisters might have had about Jesus coming in at the last hour to heal their brother have been dashed.

Martha goes out to meet Jesus and says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." I would give a lot to know Martha's tone of voice in this conversation. Is she angry? Resigned? Clearly she had hoped that Jesus would come earlier and he offers no explanation for his delay.

Jesus assures her that her brother will rise again. Martha acquiesces in the response that she knows he will be part of the resurrection of the last day when all will rise to greet the Messiah.

But Jesus challenges her, and says, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" Martha's response is one of the strongest affirmations in the Gospels. She believes that Jesus is indeed the Messiah.

But while this strong confession on Martha's part is impressive in the face of grief, it doesn't cause Jesus to spring into action. There does not appear to be any connection between her confession and the ultimate raising of her brother. And Martha's confession certainly didn't indicate that she got what was about to happen---or worrying about the stench of death in her brother's tomb would not have topped her list.

After this profound confession, Jesus is still hanging around in the field. Martha decides to go and get Mary to meet him as well. She too proclaims her belief that her brother's death could have been prevented if Jesus had been present. She is weeping and surrounded by the neighbors.

It is at this point that Jesus becomes agitated and asks where Lazarus has been laid. He also begins to weep. It is easy to sentimentalize this scene and be comforted by the fact that Jesus is sad about the death of his friend or at least the grief he is encountering. But, the reality is that the story doesn't really allow us to rest there very long. Jesus knew Lazarus was dead before he arrived, he had delayed his arrival, and knew that the sign he was about to perform was going to be for the glory of God. So why is he crying? Shouldn't he just sprint forward and perform his miracle?

Maybe he isn't in a hurry because he knows the rest of the story. Maybe he realizes that his own journey to death is upon him. That if he does as he is called to do by his Father, and raises Lazarus from the dead the die has been cast.

Jesus may realize that his own fate will be irrevocably sealed when the crowd sees him do such an act of power.

When he asks where Lazarus is laid, the response is "Come and see, Lord."

It is after that invitation that Jesus begins to weep. Come and see. It is the same call the disciples have heard throughout the ministry of Jesus. It is the call we all hear when we are embarking on the journey of discipleship. It is a call that we marvel at every time someone answers in faith. And the reason we marvel is really quite simple.

We marvel because it is a journey that almost always begins with a death.

It may be the literal loss of someone we love, or it may be the difficult death of our cherished illusions. We might have to encounter the death of a fairy tale marriage, to discover the resurrected life of one that is made up of flesh and blood people. We might have to encounter the death of our perfect career, to discover the resurrected life of differing priorities and greater simplicity. We might have to encounter the death of our small pocket sized version of God, so that we can discover the resurrected Christ who more powerful and more unknowable than we could have ever imagined.

But the simple fact is that if we are to experience a resurrected life, we have to let some things die. It is tempting to skip over Good Friday, but we cannot have Easter without the cross. No one, especially the Christ can avoid the death that leads to new life.

Further along in our story of Christopher Boone, we discover that it is not easy to relegate the characters into those who have accepted the death of their illusions and those who have not. While the father has been able to care for Christopher, he has never gotten over his wife leaving him for another man. His inability to accept this reality ultimately almost destroys the one relationship he really did care about, the one with his son. You see, his father has told Christopher that his mother died of a heart attack. That worked until Christopher finds a box of letters that his mother has been writing for the past two

years.

Christopher is of course shattered by the death of his trust in his father. And he then begins his own journey of discovery. Overcoming huge barriers and fears he plans a trip into the city to see his mother. He is unwilling to speak to his father who fears the worst. And his mother must come to terms with what her leaving has meant. Ultimately though as all three characters sit amongst the shattered remains of how they thought life would be, new life begins to emerge in the crisp air of truth. It is a small start, a new puppy that Christopher's father buys him. But it is a moment of resurrection.

Amen.

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