

Holy Textures

Understanding the Bible in its own time and in ours

John 11:32-44

*Short, easy to use, thought provoking background commentary for your sermon, bible study lesson, or scripture reflection.
Listed on The Text This Week, www.textweek.com.*

Year B, Season of Pentecost

All Saints Day

November 1 (or First Sunday in November)

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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Bruce Malina once again offers helpful historical background on the customs and behaviours that are described in this passage. (Gospel of John, pages 199-201, and 276-277, see footnote below.)

In the Gospel of John, the story of Lazarus is the final scene that sets the stage for the events of Holy Week. It is a complex story of shame-honour, friendship, trust, public reputation, God's glory, light and life, darkness and death.

The section of the story that we are dealing with today appears to demonstrate the key teaching - and question - from the earlier Verses 25-26:

Jesus said to (Martha), "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

According to Malina, at the time of Jesus it was believed that the life force of the body stayed in close proximity for 3 days. So the repeated statement (Verses 17 and 39) that Lazarus had been in the tomb for 4 days stresses that he is beyond all hope of life.

Bodies were laid in stone tombs where they underwent a year long process of putrefaction and purification as the flesh and organs rotted away. At the end of the year, the bones were then placed in a box called an ossuary and re-buried in anticipation of the general resurrection when the bones would be knit together in new life.

Verses 32-34. Mary's statement to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," can be read either as a simple statement of faith, or as a public rebuke - "If you had behaved like a truly trustworthy friend, you would have made the effort to be here in time to heal my brother before he died." Jesus' response, which the NRSV translates as "greatly disturbed," could also be translated as, "deeply indignant."

Holy Textures

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Aside. As always, when reading modern translations of the Gospels, it is crucial to remember that the word translated into English as "Jew," would be better translated as "Judean."

At the time of Jesus, there was a huge distinction between southern Judeans and northern Galileans. The capital city, Jerusalem, was in Judea. And the Temple - the centre for all religious rites - the place where the Ark containing the 10 Commandments was placed - the place where God's earthly throne was located - was in Jerusalem. And so Judeans looked down on Galileans as uncultured hillbillies.

But the Judean elite had also been co-opted by the occupying Roman Empire. Jerusalem - and the Temple - had become Roman puppets - collectors of Roman taxes, and responsible for ensuring civil order.

Thus the tension in the Gospels is not between Jesus and "the Jews." The tension is between Jesus the Galilean hillbilly proclaimer of the coming of God's Kingdom of non-violent justice and the Judean snobbish elites who are also collaborators of the Roman Empire of violent non-justice.

In the context of this passage, we need to read "the Jews" as "Judeans from Jerusalem who have close social ties - and therefore social obligations - to Lazarus." They are family and close associates who have come to Bethany to pay their due respects. They would have an instinctive reaction against the presence of Jesus who was a non-family, Galilean outsider in the midst of a close-knit social gathering to mourn Lazarus. His presence would only be acceptable if he behaved in a way that demonstrated he was a true and honourable friend of Lazarus.

Verses 35-38. Jesus weeps, and as the text says, this is a clear sign of Jesus' great love for Lazarus. However, this demonstration of great love raises again the question: If Jesus loved him so much, why did he not do the proper thing and come in time to keep him from dying? Which we know he could have done, because we know he has opened the eyes of the blind. These are comments that only those who consider themselves to be the true friends of Lazarus could make - evaluating the loyalty of an outsider. To which comment Jesus is again either greatly moved or greatly indignant.

Verses 39-40. Martha's comment again emphasizes that Lazarus has been dead for 4 days and so his body is beyond the possibility of being made alive again. Jesus' reply - again - could be read either as a simply statement of fact, or as a public rebuke of Mary: You have not believed what I have already told you.

Verses 41-43. If we delete the aside that Jesus makes to the bystanders, his prayer is simply, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. Lazarus, come out." This prayer makes clear that the restoring of Lazarus is not a

Holy Textures

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magic trick performed by Jesus, but a blessing bestowed because of the complete alignment of the Son with the Father.

Verse 44. The dead man walks out of the tomb still wrapped in the clothes in which his body was wound for burial - evidence that this is indeed the same person placed in the tomb 4 days ago.

If the authors of the Lectionary had allowed us to read a few verses more, we would discover that for some of the Jerusalem crowd, restoring Lazarus to life was the final straw that convinced the religious elite that Jesus was too dangerous to continuing living. And so from this point forward, we move toward Jesus' arrest, false charges and trial, torture, brutal execution, and burial in a tomb. A tomb from which he shall emerge, not merely restored to this life, but resurrected - still in this life for a time, but already fully alive in the eternity to come.

But what are we to make of the text we have been given for All Saints Day?

Has Lazarus been raised to everlasting life? No. Lazarus has been restored to life, but he will one day die again. Using this text for All Saints is problematic because it confuses **RESTORED** life with **RESURRECTED** life.

Has Jesus demonstrated authority over death? Yes, but not quite in the way we think of as we come today to celebrate the lives of the saints. This is not a story of resurrection. Nor is it a story about life beyond this present age.

This text is also problematic because it loses the political significance of Jesus' resurrection. Easter Sunday is a demonstration that God's love for us is stronger than death - which is Good News indeed.

But Easter Sunday is also a demonstration that God's love **FOR THE WORLD** is stronger than death.

The Roman's torture, humiliation, and brutal execution of Jesus was meant not only to kill Jesus, but also to kill his mission - to kill human hope for God's dream for the world to be a place of nonviolent justice. Easter Sunday's resurrection was vindication not only of the person Jesus, but also of his mission.

And surely when we celebrate the lives of our saints, we want to affirm - sometimes against common sense and against all odds - that they have not died in vain. Indeed, though they have died, yet they are alive. And though their work has ended, yet their dream of God's love for the world is also still alive.

Personally, I think the only way to use this text to proclaim the Good News for All Saints Day is to go beyond the text - using the more familiar verses of 11:25-26, the first part of Chapter 14, and particularly 20:31.

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Holy Textures

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* [Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina, et. al.](#), Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.