

The Perils of Being Raised from the Dead

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Invitation to Worship: Rumi

I called through your door,

“The mystics are gathering in the street. Come out!”

“Leave me alone. I’m sick.”

“I don’t care if you’re dead! Jesus is here, and he wants to resurrect somebody!”

Ancient Witness: John 11:38-44

I’ve never had a traditional view of the resurrection—of a physical or spiritual body of Jesus actually appearing, walking around and speaking. For me, Easter was a metaphorical way of describing how Jesus’ followers continued to experience the powerful presence of their beloved rabbi after he died. I see Easter not simply as a one-time event, but as an experience.

Easter, it seems to me, was a testament to the life-giving teaching and message of that mystic and spirit-person, Jesus. Let me put it as simply as I can: *Jesus was resurrected long before he died!* Jesus was awakened—spiritually raised up. He experienced Oneness—an intimate connection with God and all things. And he wanted others to experience the *same thing!* This is why the New Testament talks about the resurrection of all followers of the path. As the Muslim Mystic, Rumi, wrote, “Jesus is here, and he wants to resurrect somebody!”

About 23 years ago, I was in the midst of my own personal crisis with the Presbyterian Church when I was on trial in the church courts for conducting weddings for gay and lesbian couples. In the midst of this, I received an email that began, “Hello, old friend,” from my best friend during high school.

He saw an article about me in *The Advocate*, a national magazine, and tracked me down. Mark came out to me his senior year, and after he went off to college, we never saw each other again. So, when I learned that I was going out to Baltimore to preach at Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church, I called Mark, and he took the short drive up from D.C. We saw each other for the first time in 25 years and spent the day together.

A couple weeks before our visit, however, Mark sent me an article from the *New York Times* (“Holding AIDS at Bay, Only to Face ‘Lazarus Syndrome’” 10/6/1998) to give me an idea of some of the things he had been dealing with those past years. He had been living with AIDS for a number of years. This article haunted me, and I’ll read part of it to you.

John Lesnick spent much of the time from Thanksgiving 1995 to Valentine’s Day 1996 lying flat on his bony back at Roosevelt Hospital in New York, confronting a royal flush of AIDS ailments...

But today, Mr. Lesnick, 45, is living one of the success stories of protease inhibitors, the powerful anti-H.I.V. compounds introduced in 1996. He is swimming again, doing volunteer

work and making longer-term plans for the first time since he learned he had H.I.V., which causes AIDS, in 1985. The death pall has blown away...

Despite their renewed health, many people with AIDS have been gripped by depression, acute anxiety—especially over financial issues—and other, unexpected emotional problems, clinicians and therapists said. Some patients have ended long-term romantic relationships and others have become suicidal, an odd response to being given a reprieve from death.

This unique affliction has been called the Lazarus Syndrome after the biblical figure, whom Christ raised from the dead...

“This can be more stressful than illness itself,” said one clinical psychologist. “When you suddenly find yourself facing a much longer-term future, people are left with this feeling of, ‘What do I do now? This isn’t what I was planning. I have to worry about retirement benefits? I may have to go back to work? I may have to pay off those credit cards?’ This is tremendously traumatic and disruptive.”

Mark King, program coordinator, helps patients return to the rat race.

“We began to see more depression among these clients now than when they thought they were going to die,” Mr. King said. “They had spent years tying up loose ends, making that trip around the world they always dreamed of, planning a funeral. And in a perverse way the rug was pulled out from under them.”

Now, I think it is fascinating that someone thought of calling this condition the Lazarus Syndrome. Whenever I read this story from John, I never thought of Lazarus as depressed for being called back from the grave. But it makes sense. Being resurrected is not all fun and games! Being raised from the dead is not always what it’s cracked up to be. Important for us all to remember!

In the Hebrew Scriptures there is another example of how terrifying a new life can be. The Hebrew people were liberated, freed from their horrible enslavement in Egypt, but they faced an uncertain future. And wandering in the wilderness, they became filled with anxiety and fear. “We should have died in Egypt,” they said, turning on their leader, Moses. (Exodus 16)

By the way, many New Testament scholars believe that this Lazarus story wasn’t about an actual historical event. Miracles were part of the vocabulary of the day, and perhaps the author of John’s gospel was trying to illustrate the idea that Jesus is a Bringer of New Life to those who would listen. I think that Lazarus is a metaphor for spiritual awakening—a resurrection—that Jesus wants others to experience—including us in our lives.

Andrew Boyd wrote a very funny, irreverent and profound spiritual self-help book called, *Daily Afflictions: The agony of being connected to everything in the Universe.*

Many of us have set out on the path of enlightenment. We long for a release of selfhood in some kind of mystical union with all things. But that moment of epiphany—when we finally see the whole pattern and sense our place in the cosmic web—can be a crushing experience from which we never fully recover...

When you feel connected to everything, you also feel responsible for everything. And you cannot turn away...

I am One with the Universe, and it hurts.

In the Buddhist tradition a bodhisattva, which literally means, “awakened being,” is an enlightened person, who instead of just staying in Nirvana, the state of liberation, of bliss—the bodhisattva turns back from Nirvana and out of compassion, re-enters the world, re-enters the rat race, to help others in their suffering.

After resurrection, there is difficult work to do! It leads one to scary places, where there is suffering and oppression.

Anthony de Mello tells a story of when Buddha was once asked, “What makes a person holy?” He replied, “Every hour is divided into a certain number of seconds and every second into a certain number of fractions. Anyone who is able to be totally present in each fraction of a second is holy.” Being called out of the tomb is just the beginning of the path where we strive to live in God’s grace that is in each present moment.

This reminds me of what Emerson wrote at the beginning of his essay, “The Over-soul.”

Our faith comes in moments; our vice is habitual. Yet there is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences.

After our awakening, our faith continues to come in fleeting moments. We strive to be alive in each fraction of a second, against our habitual vices.

As spiritual beings, it seems to me that we each participate in our own Lazarus Syndrome. And we can learn from those countless AIDS patients and others, who have been brought back to life and have experienced the harsh realities of being resurrected. Jack Kornfield, a Buddhist teacher and writer, shares this story:

On the night of the Buddha’s enlightenment, after vowing to awaken, he was attacked by the armies of Mara, the god of illusion and evil. Seated under the Bodhi Tree, he was able to meditate unmoved by Mara’s strongest temptations of greed and pleasure. Then with a heart of compassion he overcame the anger and aggression unleashed by Mara, and Mara left, defeated. After this the Enlightened One rose to teach throughout India for forty-five years.

In the stories of the Buddha’s later life, however, we learn that Mara’s disappearance was only temporary. Many times afterward Mara returned to fight or tempt or undermine the Buddha...

In one version the Blessed One is seated in a cave when Mara reappears...

“Oh, my old friend has come,” says the Buddha, as he warmly greets Mara, inviting him in for tea. “How have you been?” As they sit together, Mara complains about how difficult it is to be an evil one all the time. The Buddha listens to Mara’s stories sympathetically and then asks, “Do you think it is easy to be a Buddha? Do you know what they do to my

teachings, what they do in the name of the Buddha at some of my temples? There are difficulties being in either role, a Buddha or a Mara. No one is exempt."

After enlightenment, after resurrection, one is attacked continually. There are difficulties that one has never confronted before. No one is exempt. Kornfield points out that there are cycles of awakening and openness followed by periods of fear and contraction. He introduces a Zen koan that is asked of students who have experienced their first awakening:

"A clearly enlightened person falls in the well. How is this so?" One Zen master reminds his students, "After any powerful spiritual experience there is an inevitable descent, a struggle to embody what we have seen."

After being raised up, brought back to life, there is an *inevitable descent*. There is a *struggle to embody what we have seen*.

This idea of an inevitable descent is embedded into our Christian tradition, as well. Rebirth is merely the beginning of a process, a struggle to embody what we have seen. Julian of Norwich wrote,

If there be anywhere on earth a lover of God who is always kept safe, I know nothing of it, for it was not shown to me. But this was shown: that in falling and rising again we are always kept in that same precious love.

There is no lover of God who is kept safe from falling. In fact, there are certain things that we can learn only by descent. It is all part of the same continual process—rising and falling. Moment-to-moment enlightenment requires trust, a letting go. We learn to trust the path that is circular, not linear. It is discovering in each moment that “in falling and rising again we are held in that same precious love.” In our joy and happiness, and in our depression and anxiety, we are held in that same precious love.

Let me end today with one more story told by Jack Kornfield of an old Chinese Zen monk, who after years of meditation, realized he wasn't really enlightened.

He went to the master and said, "Please, may I go find a hut at the top of the mountain and stay there until I finish this practice?" The master, knowing he was ripe, gave his permission. On the way up the mountain the monk met an old man walking down, carrying a big bundle. The old man asked, "Where are you going, monk?" The monk answered, "I'm going to the top of the mountain to sit and either get enlightened or die." Since the old man looked very wise, the monk was moved to ask him, "Say, old man, do you know anything of this enlightenment?" The old man, who was really the Bodhisattva Manjusri—said to appear to people when they are ready for enlightenment—let go of his bundle, and it dropped to the ground. As in all good Zen stories, in that moment the monk was enlightened. "You mean it is that simple; just to let go and not grasp anything!" Then the newly enlightened monk looked back at the old man and asked, "So now what?" In answer, the old man reached down and picked up the bundle again and walked off toward town.

Our lives have both sides. We are heavily burdened, weighed down, overwhelmed. And there are moments when we are reborn, raised up, awakened. And then we must reenter the world, struggle to

embody what we have seen, face uncertainty and anxiety, pick up our bundle, and carry it forward into our lives.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)