

Based upon the passage that we just heard, it seems like the story of raising Lazarus from the dead has a really happy ending.

Jesus brings Lazarus back to life, he gets his friend back, Mary and Martha get their brother back.

Also, because of this miracle that Jesus performs, lots of people now believe in him, as the last verse says, *“Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.”* (John 11:45).

All is well. Or so we’d like to believe.

You see, the problem is that today’s lectionary passage ended at verse 45, and I have wondered why, because ending here is really deceptive.

It gives an inaccurate portrayal of what really happened at the end of this story, and it hides what the true ramifications were for Jesus, when he decided to raise Lazarus.

It’s sort of like if you’re telling someone the story of what happened to the Titanic, and you tell them that the ship left Southampton, England, and everyone lived happily ever after.

That’s not exactly the complete picture.

Well, since we ended on verse 45 of today’s story, we didn’t get the complete picture either.

So, I will read you the rest of the story, with the real ending:

*But some of [the Jews] went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done.*

*So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said,*

*“What are we to do? This man is performing many signs.*

*If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.”*

*But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them,*

*“You know nothing at all!*

*You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.”*

*He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God.*

*So from that day on they planned to put him to death.”* (John 11: 46-53)

So.

That’s a bit different from the so-called happy ending that we were lead to believe, had we stopped reading at verse 45.

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead is what sealed his fate.

It wasn't the trial, or people handing him over to the authorities, or Peter denying him 3 times or Judas betraying him.

Those were all influential factors, but the action, which got the whole process rolling, was when Jesus raised his friend from the dead.

In this Gospel there are actually seven signs, which confirm Jesus as the Messiah, this is the last one of the seven.

The first is when he changes water into wine at the wedding at Cana,

the second is when he heals the royal official's son in Capernaum,

the third is when he heals the paralytic at Bethesda,

the fourth is the feeding of the five thousand,

the fifth is when Jesus walks on water,

the sixth, is when he heals the blind man from birth.

And this, seventh and final sign, is when he raises Lazarus from the dead.

There's no retaliation against Jesus, that we know of, after the first two signs.

But after the third sign, when he heals the paralytic, we're told that then the Jews started to persecute him because he healed on the Sabbath.

And it says that they started to want to kill him at that point because, *"he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God."* (John 5: 18).

So, at this point, as early as the third miracle he performed, Jesus knew that they were after him, that he was in danger.

But that didn't stop him.

And, this story, the seventh sign, that we heard about this morning, is right after he retreated across the Jordan, because they tried to stone him, for the second time, in Jerusalem.

So he knew what was at stake, and yet he didn't stop.

He didn't give into the fear.

He kept healing people on the Sabbath, kept performing miracles, despite the imminent danger.

Not only did he not shy away from giving signs, he escalated his miracles.

I mean, turning water into wine, walking on water, healing a blind man, those things are all impressive, but raising someone from the dead is on another whole level.

In fact, the writer of the Gospel specifically tells us that Lazarus had been dead for four days.

This is important because the Jewish belief was that the soul left the body after three days.

So now it's the fourth day, and Lazarus is dead, really dead, with no chance of coming back.

It's almost as if Jesus looked the authorities in the eye and said, if you were threatened by what I did before, watch this.

He stares down fear and death and says, your scare tactics won't stop me.

I imagine Jesus knew that bringing Lazarus back from the dead would seal his fate, and yet he was willing to do it anyways.

In that moment, he traded his life for the life of his friend.

He gave up his life so that one of his closest friends might live.

Or, as John 15:13 says, *"There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends."*

Jesus was close to Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

The text tells us that the sisters describe Lazarus as, "he whom [Jesus] loves,"

it also tells us that Jesus loved Mary and Martha,

and at the end of the text, after Lazarus is healed, the bystanders say, “See how he loved him!”

And this isn't the only story about Jesus' interaction with this family.

He dropped by their house often during his ministry.

When Jesus heard that Lazarus had died, knowing the high risk factors, he could have chosen not to go to their home in Bethany.

He could have kept a low profile, flown below the radar until the authorities lost interest in him.

But Jesus wasn't a coward, he was brave and prophetic and he did what he had to do, knowing he might lose his life for it.

This is the man at the center of our faith, the one whom we follow as Christ-ones.

And so we must ask ourselves, would each of us be willing to lose our life for the sake of others?

Would we be willing to die so that another person, or people, might live?

These are scary questions, and yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that being a Christian is scary.

We have domesticated it in many ways, but the life that Jesus calls us into is frightening.

As one of my clergy colleagues, Rev. Robb McCoy said,

*“If we don’t have at least a little bit of fear about what discipleship really means, then I’m not sure we really get it.*

*Following Jesus can lead people into dark places – uncomfortable, dirty, smelly places.*

*It can lead us into danger, and bring us into contact with dangerous people.*

*Following Jesus calls us to our pews and our hymns and our rituals, but it also demands that we go out into the world.*

*Jesus calls us to love.*

*And love can be difficult sometimes.*

*Following Jesus means that we have to love, and it’s okay if that scares you a little.*

*It should.*

*It means that you’re paying attention.*

*It means that you have your eyes wide open to the cost of discipleship.*

*It means that you didn’t stop reading the story of Lazarus with the [happy ending].”* (“Lazarus: Miracle and Motive <https://fatpastor.me/2011/04/08/lazarus-miracle-and-motive/>).

The story of Lazarus did not end when the dead man came out of the tomb, the story ended when the authorities, on that day, planned to put Jesus to death.

Now, at the start of this passage, when Jesus says that Lazarus is dead, he has a discussion with his disciples about whether to go to Bethany to see Mary and Martha.

Thomas, one of his disciples, chimes in and says, *“Let us also go, that we may die with him.”* (John 11:16).

He wasn't talking about dying with Lazarus, he was talking about dying with Jesus.

Thomas gets a bad rap for being doubtful, but in this moment, he gets it.

He gets that Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead would speed his own death, and Thomas is basically saying, I am willing to die too.

So that begs the question, of each of us,

as Christ followers,

as followers of the one who gave his life so that his best friend might live,

are we willing to give our lives so that others might live?

Are we willing to die with Jesus? Amen.