

## The Raising of Lazarus John 11.1-45



The Raising of Lazarus by Vincent van Gogh. It was painted in the last nine months of his life.

Van Gogh based the painting on a much older one by another Dutch artist, Rembrandt. Van Gogh has reversed the original image, turning it from left to right; and he has pared the story down to its essential components. He reduced the number of witnesses present just to the two sisters, Martha and Mary. (Art critics reckon Van Gogh has modelled them on two women of his acquaintance from Arles).

At first glance it might look like he has removed Jesus, but the figure of Jesus isn't so much as removed as transformed: Van Gogh takes the illuminated raised hand of Rembrandt's Jesus and turns it into the sun, the source of life, whose warm yellow light suffuses the whole scene and which, in particular, surrounds Lazarus.

And there's one other important change: Van Gogh paints Lazarus with a red beard, like his own: this is the artist himself.

Van Gogh has appreciated that the story of the raising of Lazarus is not merely an interesting miracle story about the past, something that Jesus once did; it is also a *sign*, a sign of what Jesus still does: raising people up who are bound and entombed. Something that Van Gogh himself may well have longed for when he painted this picture.

Today's reading comes from John's gospel, and John writes his Gospel in a way that is rather different to the other three narratives. It is a much more stylised, meditated over text, probably the last of the four to be written. And in the first half of his Gospel, before he turns to the account of Jesus's arrest, John presents us his readers with seven 'signs'. John doesn't call them miracles, he calls them 'signs'. And the raising of Lazarus is the last of the seven.

Let's explore them: John may have arranged them in mirror form in pairs, and that's how I'll relate them.

SIGNS IN JOHNS GOSPEL						
1 Wedding at Cana	2 Healing of sick son	3 Lame man walks	4 Feeding of many	5 Jesus walks on water	6 Healing of blind man	7 Raising of Lazarus
Glory Cold stone Joy	Healing Seeing/ not seeing	Walking Water Jesus Lord of creation	The eucharist Jesus feeds us	Walking Water Jesus Lord of creation	Healing Seeing/ not seeing	Glory Cold stone Joy
Future life now	Belief				Belief	Future life now

The first sign is the turning of water into wine at the wedding at Cana and it shares certain details with the last sign, which involves a funeral (the raising of Lazarus). John tells us that the first and last signs both occur to 'reveal' - or make obvious - 'Jesus's glory'; we might see a parallel between the cold stone tomb-like water jars out of which comes joy-giving wine, and the cold stone tomb of Lazarus - out of which comes the joy of his resurrection.

Both signs are about enjoying the future heavenly life already in the here and now.

Signs two and six are healing stories which focus on belief. One is about the sick son of a royal official who Jesus says will be healed without him even needing to visit; to which the official believes without seeing. The sixth sign is about the healing of a blind man who at the end of the story also believes in Jesus whilst the Pharisees, who could see, refuse to believe. John may well have been thinking of future readers like us, who would never see Jesus in the flesh but who could still believe and find wholeness.

Signs three and five are about walking and water and Jesus being Lord of creation. Sign three is the story of the lame man at pool of Bethesda who can't get up to reach the miraculous healing water. Jesus heals him, but on the Sabbath for which he is criticised because the Sabbath is meant to be the day of rest recalling the final day of creation. Jesus responds, though, by saying that he heals every day, creation doesn't stop when Jesus is around. Sign five shows Jesus himself walking *on* water an image which connects with Old Testament poetic descriptions of God treading down the waters of chaos at the start of time to create the world. Again, another sign that Jesus channels the power of God as creator.

Sandwiched in the middle of our seven is the fourth sign: the feeding of a large crowd with bread and fishes (John's retelling of the feeding of the five thousand) except the way John tells it, he mixes imagery from the last supper which he doesn't otherwise relate. Jesus takes, blesses, breaks and gives the bread to the crowd, so that in John's account it becomes a symbolic sign-story of the eucharist - the meal that feeds Christian people still and which continues to give us sustenance for life.



John has, then, taken the earlier traditions about the many miracles that Jesus once did, whittled them down to seven, and turned them into symbolic signs that tell us about what Jesus continues to do. As he tells us right at the end of the Gospel, 'Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.'

So Van Gogh wasn't being self-indulgent in putting himself in painting himself as Lazarus. No, Van Gogh had exactly got John's point: this is precisely a story about our continuing need for resurrection here and now, our need to be unwrapped from the things that bind us and keep us immobile, our longing to find release from different kinds of death and entombment. Our need to feel the warm blessing of God's light and life breaking through to give us light in darkness and warmth in cold.

I find Van Gogh's turning of Jesus into the Sun particularly helpful for it reminds us that the need for, and the experience of, light and warmth breaking through, is universal. It doesn't just happen to Christians; it isn't just a religious experience: God's resurrection life is constantly being experienced.

Over the years, I've experienced many Lazaruses coming back to life (and perhaps you have, too). Sometimes they have been quite remarkable individuals, for example, whose childhoods have been blighted by abuse or neglect but who have found themselves slowly standing up again (which is quite literally what the word resurrection means – to stand back up again). They have felt the warm rays of God's love breaking through and touching them: touching them through friends who accept them; through falling in love with someone who loves them back; through being praised for an academic or a social achievement; or in my case in the chaplaincy, through being listened to and fed, day in day out, whilst they get their stuff together, get therapy, try prayer, experience laughter, and find belonging.

Resurrection is not something to be confined to the afterlife, or even to Christians. The raising of Lazarus is John's sign to tell us that God is constantly at work bringing forth life from deathly situations. Our part as Christians is to *name* this activity as God, wherever it occurs, to celebrate it in ritual, to make space for more of it in the world through our actions, to join in with it as it breaks in and transforms, and also to experience and to nurture its presence for ourselves. And we do that by making sure we take time to put ourselves into the warm gaze of God, like Van Gogh putting himself into the picture, making space to experience God in whatever forms nourish us best.

The raising of Lazarus is a sign which we are invited to lean into, to rest upon, to trust in, and to live out of.