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The story of the raising of Lazarus is a very involved story. You might be someone who says 'Wow, look at that', as you feel amazed at the picture the gospel words conjure up for us. Or you might be someone who thinks 'that can't possibly happen; people don't come back to life like that', therefore the Christian gospel must be built on a fraud. Both reactions miss the point of John the Evangelist in telling this story. The story is involved, as I say – but point of it is simple and also profound.

But let me start somewhere else with a classic Christian book entitled 'True Resurrection', first published in 1972 and which has gone through many reprints since. The author, Harry Williams, was a Cambridge theologian academic who went through a psychological breakdown. It led him to become a monk in the Yorkshire monastery at Mirfield. On his recovery, Williams became a wonderful spiritual writer, helping many of his generation to face their doubts and spiritual uncertainties without Christian guilt.

In his book, Williams imagines a fictional character called Emily. Emily had lived a fairly humdrum life. Her husband had recently died, but their relationship had never particularly been warm. This meant that her husband's death confronted her not so much with what she was but what she wasn't, and what she wasn't was alive. The death somehow made her aware that her aliveness had been driven from her by a fairly lifeless marriage. In other words, she felt that she was dead too. The emptiness she was covering up was suddenly no longer covered up but out in the open, now that she was alone and had to rediscover herself. Part of that rediscovery was that eventually she got involved with the Samaritans – a friend had invited her to take it up "for something to do". Now, against the rules of the Samaritans, Emily kept track of some of those who sought help from her. This is what happened according to Williams's fiction: 'In the unsatisfactoriness of their lives, their obvious need, Emily was beginning to discover her own needs.' It's the classic situation of many in the caring professions – the carer is also having needs met in their caring for someone else. Then on one occasion Emily reached out to someone with a simple hug, making bodily contact. That was it – it made her cry – not for her client she realised, but for herself. Something was being restored in her, to her – a wholeness to her personality – and Williams surmises that a good part of it was that her body was being given back to her. Williams calls this restoration of the body 'resurrection'. It is resurrection as discovery, as restoration, as coming to life, perhaps for the first time, in some fulfilling way that human beings can identify as the meaning of their life. The distance between the physicality of the world as it is and our own participation in that world has been overcome.

Illness is perhaps the most dramatic reminder of our physicality; and it often provides the occasion for reflecting on how we drive ourselves, or how we fail to take care of ourselves. Such reflections might lead us to make adjustments in lifestyle, and that would be a good thing. We would be restored to ourselves. Here's some more words from Harry Williams: 'The essence of miracle is not that it is dramatic, nor that it interferes with the natural world which has its own laws. Miracle is not what we invoke when science appears to have failed. The essence of miracle is our discovery of what we are.'

Harry Williams's fictional story is an illustration of the general principle that there is a creativity at work in the depths of our ordinariness. Call it a thirst for life itself. Call it the wonder of being basically alive at all. Call it the heartbeat of the universe. St.John's gospel calls it poetically 'the word of God' which brings light and life. Remember the opening words of the first chapter: In the beginning was the word and the word was the light and life of everyone. Just as I, a human being, speak in order to express myself, so the world is the poetic expression of God's speech. There is an offer of vitality which is ours for the embracing and which brings us fullness of being. One day we shall all die, and that strikes a note of anxiety within us. But the creativity of life itself can be such that even that anxiety does not cancel out the creativity at work everywhere. This is what it is to believe in God. And even as I say that I am aware that it may fly in the face of a lot of experience. But there are breakthroughs, and there are moments of intensity which bring us the fullness of life itself. The Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas, wrote a poem about his father's death, and his poem contained the immortal line

‘Rage, rage, against the dying of the light’. Even our anguish and anger at the experience of loss can speak of the drive for life at the heart of life itself.

What has this to do with today’s gospel passage? The answer is: everything. The punch of the story is not in the final scene where Lazarus comes from the tomb, but in the middle of the story when John the Evangelist has Jesus say to Martha ‘I am the resurrection and the life’. Before the final scene there is this theological conversation between Martha and Jesus. Martha has imperfect comprehension by assuming that the resurrection will happen on the last day of the present world order when everything will be changed and a new world will be here. John’s Gospel doesn’t think that way – there’s not going to be a general resurrection of the dead or a final judgement or a Second Coming. That kind of belief, 70+ years after Jesus’s death, is not necessary any more. God’s life in you, for you, is available now, here; that’s what you should concentrate on. ‘Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, everyone who believes in me will never die.’ It’s what Jesus left behind as God’s gift, that’s all you need, and it has the impact of a resurrection.

The resurrection is a life-affirming experience now or it is nothing at all. Don’t put off until tomorrow what is being offered today. Life is the result of God’s speech, and I am that speech for you, says John’s Jesus. “I am the resurrection and the life”. In other words: “I am the source of all freshness and newness in your struggle to perceive God’s will and purposes. I am the fulfilment of all your human longings for meaning, for hope, for goodness. I am here no matter what crushing death-dealing blow life delivers to you, and that includes death itself. Do not cling to the anxieties of death, that of others and your own. Life in all its fullness is my gift to the world and is assured with your attachment to me.” That’s the belief. And John demonstrates this belief by having Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead. So the raising of Lazarus, his resurrection, simply illustrates the point about Jesus as the source of new beginnings. The miracle is not there to convince you of this, for to embrace this belief about Jesus is a matter of trust and faith. Actually it’s even better if you embrace this allegiance in trust because if you are impressed by miracles then you will have missed the point. I am the source of the life that really matters, the gift of God’s grace living in you – that’s John’s Christian message for us. Belief in Jesus as God’s expression of creative energy is what matters. For that is the cause of our wonder; the cause of our healing; and the cause of our experience of resurrection when we open ourselves to its possibility. The life of God in us is greater than the threat of even death and the Lazarus story has been written to drive that point home, counter-intuitively, for us. Amen.