

To be honest, I have never been fully comfortable with the fact that Jesus raised people from the dead. A *less cerebral* way to say that would be to admit that I never really *liked* the fact that Jesus raised people from the dead.

We often point to the scene where Jesus wept for his friend Lazarus¹ as a sign of his true humanity, the fact that Jesus too has felt the sting of death. But then he goes and raises Lazarus from the dead. That just raises a whole bunch of questions, doesn't it? Why did Jesus weep for his friend who he was then going to bring back to life? Or did he bring him back to life because he could not stand the loss of his friend?

Those are just a few of the immediate questions, nevermind further questions about what happened to Lazarus after this resurrection... how did his family react, did he understand what had happened to him, had he been walking the streets of heaven and find himself whisked back to earth? Someone once told me they would have been plenty mad to have reached the gates of heaven only to be told that he had to go back to earth.

We have another story today of Jesus bringing Jairus' daughter back to life. Now I suppose I should say that some scholars and theologians want to argue that she was not really dead, but was sleeping, just as Jesus said. Now I will admit that it is not clear why Jesus said that she was sleeping, He does not explain it and I won't put my words and ideas in his mouth. But I do know that everyone around this girl knew that she was dead... this was a culture that was familiar with the realities of death. We see death on the movies and television and are used to people seeming to be dead only to come back again later on. But this was not make-believe; these people would know the clear physiological signs that someone had died. Jesus comes along and brings her back to life, and the question that comes to my mind is: why?

Certainly Jesus knew that death is a part of life. Certainly both Lazarus and Jairus' daughter eventually died again. But most of all, why did Jesus choose to raise these particular people from the dead? Weren't there hundreds of others who had died while Jesus was nearby? Why pick these two? What about the others, like John the Baptist? Wouldn't bringing him back to life bring much more attention to Jesus' power than raising Lazarus and this unnamed girl? Again, Jesus offered no explanation, so there's no way for us to really know why he chose to do what he did.

What is clear enough is that Jesus felt the pain of loss, both for Lazarus (who he knew) and for Jairus' daughter (who he had never met). Jesus knew – perhaps better than anyone – the value of life, and was saddened by the loss of life. Even when they came to arrest him and Peter struck off the ear of the soldier, Jesus stopped him and healed the ear.²

Although I understand all of that, I still don't fully understand why Jesus raised these two people from the dead? Perhaps it was to give those who witnessed the event a sign that death was no longer the end. To those who witnessed what Jesus had done, perhaps death would be less fearful. Perhaps they would have a better understanding of what Jesus meant when he said "I am the resurrection and the life".³

That might again lead us to the other question, "Why didn't he do it more often?" "Why not to 'more important' people?" "Why not in front of a bigger audience?" And I am sure that Jesus' followers asked that same question, just like they wondered why he kept telling people not to say anything about who had healed them. Jesus was not interested in making grand signs that would "make" people believe in him. When they asked him for signs, Jesus gave them none.

And who can blame him? After all, look what happened when he did perform miracles:

When he healed people in front of crowds, the people in power complained that he did it on the wrong day or in the wrong way. But no one asked him to raise these two people from the dead. No one was around to criticize or scorn him when he did. In fact maybe that was a good reason for him to say that the girl was only sleeping, so that when she was seen later on, people would say, "Well I guess he was right, she was only sleeping." Did you notice that only a few people were allowed to see Jesus bring the girl back to life? Only her parents and Jesus' friends remained in the house to see him restore her to life.

Meanwhile on the way to the house he encountered another nameless woman, another stranger. More questions – why did Jesus, on the way to save this little girl's life, stop to make a scene with this woman who had already been healed? I am sure that Jesus' followers asked the same questions. After all, Jairus was a public figure, someone noteworthy.... if Jesus could help him, of course people would notice, and maybe Jesus would get some [respect] that he deserved... but just when everyone is looking, when people are crowding around, all of a sudden Jesus asks who touched him.

It turns out that not only does Jesus value the life of his friends, like Lazarus, and strangers like Jairus' daughter, he also valued the life of this nameless woman who had suffered much for 12 years. If she had been healed silently, slipped up, touched him and vanished into the crowd, no one would have known that she had been healed. In a place where she would have been an outcast for her illness that made her ritually unclean, a silent healing would have brought healing for her body, but no one would have known she was healed, no one would have known that she was no longer unclean, and she would have remained an outcast – dead from society

Jesus knew that touching his cloak had not brought all of the healing that she needed, so he stopped and made a scene to bring attention to her healing, not for his own sake, but for hers.

The reading today brought not only one little 12 year-old girl back from the dead, but a woman who had been suffering for 12 years as well, living as one who was cut off from society.

How are we to respond to this?
What is there for us to learn?

It was not an accident that Jesus came as a human to live on earth. It was not merely to prepare us for life after death, life in heaven. Being Christ-like is not as simple as “getting saved” and then thinking that the job is done. Being Christ-like means looking around for ways in which we can help others who have been shut out by society, those we would rather ignore or turn away. It means being less interested with impressing people than with helping people, less interested in big numbers and more interested in significant impact. It means being happier with 4 new members to the church who are being nurtured than 16 new members who are not.

Numbers make it easy to calculate, categorize, and compare. How many people are involved over here? How many people are participating here? But as we look at the life of Jesus we see that He was not into big numbers. It seems that Jesus worked very inefficiently, often spending his time with a small group or even one person. But because the time which was spent and the relationship which was developed was significant, that person was then able to go out and develop significant relationships and share what they had learned.

The woman who was healed left that day, changed from the experience of meeting Jesus. The rest of the crowd may not have taken much notice, and very few were probably actually changed from it.

The parents of the little girl left that day changed from the experience of meeting Jesus. The rest of the crowd probably took little notice (since nothing is mentioned about how they responded).

When we see how precious life is and seek to bring the love and peace and grace of Jesus to those around us, people will be changed, not from the experience of meeting us, but of meeting Jesus. That is our calling, not to be Jesus, but to live so we show Jesus to all.

Amen.

Notes:

1. The story of Lazarus can be found in John 11.
2. The story of Jesus' arrest as found in Luke 22:47ff
3. Also in John 11, in the context of the story of Lazarus.