

The Lazarus Syndrome

Evangelicals complain that America needs to return to its roots as a Christian nation. There are two things wrong with this idea. First, America was never a Christian nation. In fact, the First Amendment expressly forbids the establishment of any religion in our country, Christian or otherwise. Second, even the Founding Fathers weren't all Christians. Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Madison and Monroe were deists who believed in a supreme being but not in the divinity of Christ. Thomas Jefferson even took scissors and paste to the New Testament and produced his own gospel, with all the supernatural bits removed. His theory was that Jesus was a great teacher, and there was no need to muck things up with a lot of hocus-pocus.

I mention this because one of the episodes that didn't appear in Jefferson's Bible is this morning's Gospel reading. It's not hard to figure out why. Raising Lazarus from the dead was no run-of-the-mill miracle. Healing the sick, feeding the 5,000, even walking on water — as impressive as they were, pale by comparison. Even that notorious deist Benjamin Franklin said as much: "Nothing is certain except death and taxes." (Even Jesus couldn't do anything about taxes; he told people to "render unto Caesar.")

By the 19th century, biblical scholars were on a quest for the historical Jesus — a futile task, given that the only contemporaneous source materials were written by his followers. The effort continues today with the Jesus Seminar, in which scholars vote on the historical validity of Jesus' words and actions as set forth in the gospels. The Seminar's participants, mostly liberal academics, have concluded that Jesus probably did not say most of what is attributed to him in the gospels, nor did he perform such miracles as walking on water and raising Lazarus from the dead, much less rising from the dead himself.

So where does that leave us? I frankly don't believe you gain very much by trying to debunk Scripture. If you think of religion as fairy tales for adults, so be it. I'm inclined to take the stories on their own terms and see where that leads us.

I keep coming back to John Donne's statement about miracles. He said there's nothing "God hath established in a constant course of nature, and which therefore is done every day, but would seem a Miracle, and exercise our admiration, if it were done but once." A rose in full bloom won't command much attention in a greenhouse full of them but would appear breathtaking to someone who'd never seen one before.

Raising someone from the dead might appear to be extraordinary. But, in fact, it now happens all the time. Imagine if someone from the first century had time-traveled to that Bills - Bengals game a few months back and watched a player drop dead on the field in front of thousands of spectators, only to be revived. Was that a miracle? Sure it was. But such miracles no longer happen only once. Emergency-room doctors and EMTs now routinely bring people back to life after they stopped showing any vital signs.

There are even rare instances in which people have returned to life after all efforts at resuscitation have failed. This phenomenon is referred to in medical literature as the Lazarus syndrome after you-know-who. You may have read about such a case several months ago at an Alzheimer's facility in Iowa. A 66-year-old patient was declared dead after the woman showed no pulse, movement or other signs of life. She was placed in a body bag and sent to a funeral home. The funeral home staff unzipped the bag and found the woman had spontaneously returned to life.

Not long after the NFL player was raised from the dead, I opened my morning paper and saw a familiar face smiling on page one. It was Jill Irwin, a member of our congregation, standing next to a man whose life she had saved. The guy had suffered a heart attack in a Farmington restaurant. Jill, who didn't know him, sprang into action and performed CPR until medics arrived on the scene. The man called Jill "my angel." I suspect our time-traveller from the first century might conclude the same thing if he had witnessed her bringing someone back life.

The article mentioned that Jill was a dental hygienist. As it happened, I had my six-month dental checkup that same afternoon. So I asked my hygienist whether she was trained in CPR. Oh, yes, she said, it was a requirement. And what's more, she had to get re-certified every two years. I told her it was comforting to know that an old guy like me didn't have to worry about going into cardiac arrest while getting his teeth cleaned.

According to one estimate, some 22 million people are trained annually in CPR around the world. That's 22 million people who know how to raise people from the dead. This is not to minimize Jesus' achievement in reviving Lazarus. As far as we know, Jesus was the only one who knew how to do it at the time. But he also told his disciples, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do."

Jesus didn't surround himself with disciples so he'd have an audience while he performed magic tricks. He wanted them to go and do likewise. When they asked him to send the crowds away to get something to eat, he told them, "You give them something to eat." But how were they supposed to feed thousands of people with only five loaves of bread and two fish? Jesus took what little they had and somehow fed the multitude, with plenty left over.

How about raising people from the dead? There was no CPR in the first century and no defibrillators. St. Peter brought a woman named Tabitha back to life. St. Paul revived a young man named Eutychus. Peter and Paul were able to do it because they believed they could do it. And they believed they could do it because they believed Jesus when he told them they could do it. Remember what he told his disciples: "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do."

The key word here is *believe*. When Lazarus died, Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha replied, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When Jesus ordered the stone to be rolled away from Lazarus' tomb, Mary warned him her brother had been dead for four days. The King James translation doesn't mince words. It reads, "Lord, by this time he stinketh." But when they rolled the stone away, it turned out that Lazarus liveth. Jesus said to Mary, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" There's that word again: *believe*.

So if we are meant to do greater things than Jesus did, why don't we? The apostles may have performed some miracles, but we haven't seen much since. Why not? According to the biblical creation story, we are created in God's image and given dominion, or lordship, over the earth. Yes, we sit comfortably atop nature's food chain. But does our lordship extend to walking on water?

Everyone remembers the gospel story in which Jesus walked on water. We forget that he encouraged Peter to get out of the boat and do the same. Peter actually took a few steps before the wind began to blow. He got frightened and started to sink. “Lord, save me!” he cried – surely the most heart-felt prayer in all of Scripture. Jesus reached out to save him. “O man of little faith,” he scolded, “why did you doubt?”

“Man is God afraid,” the Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck is supposed to have said. This would suggest that the principal difference between Jesus and the rest of us is not that he is God and we are not; rather, he knows himself to be God and we’re afraid to get out of the boat. Peter, at least, took a few faltering steps before fear overcame him. But, so far as we know, he never tried again. In his case, I suspect there was more to it than just fear of getting wet.

The gospel narrative reports the disciples were terrified when they first saw Jesus walking toward their boat on the Sea of Galilee. “Truly you are the son of God,” they cried. Peter’s first impulse was to climb out of the boat, but he then thought better of it. In the end, he may have concluded it was better to worship Jesus rather than to be like him. Needless to say, it is no different with the rest of us. Perhaps the main reason we think Jesus is the “only begotten” son of God is that we don’t yet know fully understand what it means to be human.

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