

Imagine this scenario: You've just struck the killing blow against a demonic cult leader. As you go to collect a dangerous object from his remains, your former ally holds you at gunpoint and retrieves "the sample" for herself. She takes off in a chopper, tossing you the keys to a Jet Ski, and warning that you have just three minutes to get away before explosives level the island. You drag the president's daughter behind you, watching the clock tick down. Mounting the Jet Ski, you make your way through a cave, pieces of rock falling around you. You speed toward the exit and the climactic finish, suddenly you jerk a little too far to the left, and smash directly into a wall. You are dead. A box appears on the screen. 'Would you like to continue?' Choose "Yes," and you're back on the way to that Jet Ski - with only three minutes to escape! This is resurrection in the digital age!

For the more mature amongst us, you analogue or celluloid types, perhaps your entertainment was more 1930s Hammer House of horror, blood running down the screen the mummy coming forth from the tomb; a terrifying, zombie like creature. Now we are getting closer to the imagery conjured up by today's gospel...Lazarus emerging from the tomb! It is strange isn't it that we seem to have an unhealthy fascination with death, zombie and horror movies still abound, dystopian post-apocalyptic films are all the rage; video games are becoming more lifelike. Either that or some awful, mushy, sentimental stuff, remember 'Ghost' with Demi Moore!

We don't deal well with the true nature of death, we would much rather not deal with it all and we make an art form of avoiding it. For Jesus it was very real. 'Jesus wept.'

David Constantine wrote two Sonnets – Lazarus to Christ and Christ to Lazarus. This is the first:

You are forgetting. I was indeed dead,  
Not comatose, nor sleeping, and could no more  
Wish for resurrection than what we are before  
Can wish for birth. I had already slid  
Four days down when you hauled me back into the air.  
Now they come to watch me break bread  
And drink the wine, even the tactful plead  
With dumb faces to be told something, and, dear,  
Even you, who wept for me and of whom it is said  
You know all things, what I mutter in nightmare  
I believe you lie awake to overhear.  
You too are curious, you too make me afraid.  
Of my own cold heart. However I wash,  
I cannot get the foist out of my flesh.

Constantine makes an interesting point which goes to heart of what the reading is all about. Understandably, being so close to Easter I think we want to read a resurrection account. But I wonder if we've missed the point, is this new life Lazarus has more difficult, demanding, challenging than the first?

When preparing families for the funerals of their loved ones I experience intensely mixed emotions. Grief in all its forms is always present, but it is often mingled with resentment, outrage, injustice, unfairness. Jesus wept. I think this is because there is a sense that nature has taken back more than it has given. Nature is our flesh and blood, the organic, squidgy bit that we move around in, it dies, wears out but we are more than, we are part of the natural world, yes, but we reach beyond it, hence our grief is mingled with anger at what has been lost; nature has taken what did not belong to it. Jesus wept. But there is also the sense in which, try as we might we can never look back without some sort of regret, missed opportunities, things said or not said as the case may be. There are the inevitable times when we have turned away from God and become wrapped up in ourselves and I think that in the Lazarus account it is the words of Jesus 'unbind him, let him go' that we find the key to what is going on.

John is trying to tell us that Lazarus has died an ordinary death, following an ordinary life, he became sick and died a natural death and Jesus wept. His wrappings represent what he has taken to the grave, the regrets and misgivings; but importantly the things that we use to protect ourselves from thinking too much about our mortality; our escapism. But the new life of faith, faith that trusts in the power of Jesus' resurrection is a life which speaks of hope, life unbound, freedom from the need to fill up with our lives with things that don't matter; freedom from fear, the fear that threatens to overwhelm.

Everything in John's gospel has a purpose. Lazarus appeared wrapped up, at Jesus' tomb the wrappings had been laid to one side. So Lazarus has not been resurrected but like Nicodemus being born again, like the Samaritan woman being washed in water of life, like the man born blind seeing anew... he has become new. We could say that each of these individuals has been baptised, joined to Christ; life, death resurrection the lot! Only Christ is resurrected... 'I am the resurrection and the life' we *share in it*. Perhaps Lazarus found this new life too difficult, I think perhaps that David Constantine thought so, and it is true he became a target for the authorities and no doubt everyone wanted a piece of him; but the life of faith is not meant to be easy. I'm sure most of us, at times, find it all too difficult?

As we approach ever closer to Easter, let us not forget that it is only by our hope in the one who goes before us that we may look upon his death and participate in his singular victory over our own death. Let us be unbound by dodgy ideas about life, faith and death which offer little hope to a world enslaved by fear. Instead, let us cling to Christ who by his life, death and resurrection remains the only hope we have that our bones will be reunited in common worship of the one true God.