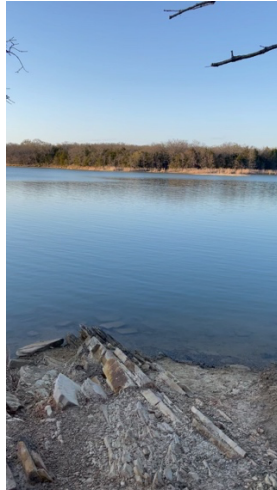


***The Gospel of John***  
***Session Seven – The Shepherd at the Gate***  
***The Raising of Lazarus***  
***(John 10 – 11)***



***Jesus the Shepherd and the Sheep Gate***  
***Lazarus: Breaking the Final Barrier***  
***There's Something about Mary***

***Jesus the Shepherd and the Sheep Gate***

This episode has established finally the hostility of the Jews, basically the Jewish authorities, to Jesus, even though there are apparently those who continue to be impressed by his works, to which Jesus appeals again. Yet the judgement of the Jews is finally condemnatory. We have noticed that Jesus' claims, offensive though they may be to the sensibilities of the Jews, do not entail his setting himself up over against their God. Rather, he claims that because of his fulfillment of God's command and his accomplishment of God's work he is the definitive manifestation or revelation of God. This the Jews deny. The issue could not be more sharply drawn.

The common, consistent factor in Jesus' opening discourse is the use of the sheep metaphor to describe Jesus' disciples. Jesus himself is both the gate and the good shepherd, as he uses the characteristic "I am" formula to describe himself. The discourse does not advance Christology so much as ecclesiology [theology as applied to the nature and structure of the Christian Church]. Like the parable or metaphor of the vine, it conveys something significant about Jesus' followers and their relationship to him. He is their leader and protector, their access to God and salvation. They are intimately known by him as individuals. By way of contrast, there are other shepherd figures whose

relationship to the sheep only serves their own ends, whose access to the sheep is illegitimate. In crisis they flee the sheep and leave them to a dire fate; the sheep are not secure in these shepherds' hands – quite the contrary. Even as the shepherd knows the sheep, so the sheep know the shepherd. Their security is grounded ultimately in their having been given to Jesus, chosen, by the Father. Those who do not believe are not among those chosen sheep.

The ominous false shepherds, already described in Scripture (Ezek 34:1 – 10; Zech 11:4 – 10), are not explicitly identified. In the context, however, they must be closely related to – if not identical with – those who deny Jesus' sight-giving power and accuse him of blasphemy. When Jesus says that "all who came before me are thieves and bandits", he obviously does not mean the fathers and prophets of Israel, but those contemporary religious authorities who have immediately preceded Jesus and who challenge and reject him. They will appear at the end of the following episode (11:45 – 53), as they successfully conspire to have him put out of the way.

– D. Moody Smith (from *John: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999)

### ***Lazarus: Breaking the Final Barrier***

The Book of Signs is now drawing to a close. There have been seven separate episodes, seven signs, seven pointers to a meaning that the sign itself could never capture. Only people failing to grasp the purpose of the author of this book would call them miracle stories. They are narratives which lead to a new perspective, a new consciousness. A sign permeates reality and interprets it.

Interwoven through these signs is a series of Johannine characters. We now come to the final and most complex of these characters. His name is Lazarus. More than any other figure in the Fourth Gospel, Lazarus screams out the message that to read this book as if it were an account of literal history is to misunderstand it completely.

We first note that Lazarus has not been mentioned in any pre-Johannine Christian source. A man this crucially important to the Jesus story, as John was developing it, would, if he were a real person, surely have made an impression on someone else in the sixty-five to seventy years of Christian history before the gospel of John was written...

Earlier we noted that Jesus did not just turn water into wine; he turned it into 150 gallons of wine. Jesus did not just heal a cripple; he healed a man who had been crippled for thirty-eight years. Jesus did not just bring sight to a blind man, but to a man who had been "born blind." Now Jesus is not just going to raise someone from

the dead; he is going to raise a man who has been dead for four days and who remains bound in burial cloths and whose body is already in the process of decay. . .

“Many of the Jerusalem Jews, who had come to be with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, now believed in him; but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done”. (John 11:45 – 46) [The Pharisees and Caiaphas – the chief priest – plot to arrest Jesus and have him killed.]

Everyone in this episode is destined to play his or her role in this cosmic drama, for John tells us that “from that day on they took counsel on how to put him to death” (John 11:53). The final scene is set: “The Passover of the Jews was at hand” (John 11:55).

While the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead was never told before this gospel’s writing, we can still ask if there is any known source that John might have used to develop this character and this story. A search of the earlier gospels provides a possible clue. There is a character named Lazarus mentioned in a parable that only Luke records. It is known as the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19 – 31). [The poor man – Lazarus – has been ignored by the rich man when both were living. Both men die and while Lazarus rests “in the bosom of Abraham,” the rich man goes to an unspecified place of torment. The rich man begs for Father Abraham to send Lazarus to him to “dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue.” After Abraham refuses, the rich man asks him to send Lazarus to warn his brothers who are still living.” ]

Abraham makes the point that the story of the raising of Lazarus is designed to demonstrate: “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead” (Luke 16:31)

John, in his Lazarus account, is writing on several levels. First, he uses the story of the raising of Lazarus to demonstrate the truth of Abraham’s words in Luke’s parable. The result of the final sign in the Book of Signs is that even in the face of the raising of the four-days-dead Lazarus, the result is still predictable: The synagogue authorities are not moved to open themselves to new possibilities. From their perspective, the possibilities are terribly threatening. All of the things that have been holding the Jewish nation together in its tribal identity would be relativized if what John believes Jesus means is true. All of those things that keep the members of the human family separated from each other would disappear. Those things constitute only the limits on our humanity that bind our potential. Jesus thus represents an ultimate threat to our tribal and religious life. The insight Luke had developed in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man is that “they will not be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.” Now in the Fourth Gospel this parable is related as if it were history, in order to demonstrate that what the parable suggests is true – and not just in a parable, but in life itself.

The second level at which John is writing is also obvious. It had now been sixty-five to seventy years since the final events in Jesus' life had occurred. He had been crucified. John's conviction and that of his fellow disciples was that in the moment of Easter the boundary of death had been transcended, life had expanded to incredible new dimensions and a new oneness was experienced as human lives stepped beyond self-consciousness into the universal consciousness of entering the eternal life of God. Did that life-changing moment bring faith? That is the question John is posing, and he answers it so clearly. No, he says, it brought persecution and expulsion from the synagogue community. Those who trusted Moses did not understand that to which Moses pointed. They did not see in Jesus the prophet whom Moses had promised that God would someday raise up. They saw the law, the "word of God" that came through Moses, but they could not see the grace and truth that came through Jesus or hear the "word of God" that was in Jesus. It was this vision of resurrection that finally broke the synagogue in two. The enemies of Jesus were not able to believe even, as Luke's parable suggested, if one "rose from the dead." Their response to Lazarus was identical with their response to Jesus. On this note the Book of Signs begins to come to an end.

– John Shelby Spong (adapted from *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, Harper One, New York, 2013)

### ***There's Something about Mary***

Though chapter 11 is mostly Martha's story, Mary is not absent. She is named first in verse 1, and verse 2 points ahead to the next chapter, where she'll get her fifteen minutes in the spotlight. This pointing ahead to a story that had not yet happened is a typical literary technique used by this author. It is called prolepsis (e.g., 3:24 and 6:71). The author also refers the reader back to events that have already occurred in the narrative; that is called analepsis (see 18:14 and 19:39). Remember that we are meant to read the whole Gospel, in order, like a novel, not just in pieces here and there pulled out of the narrative. It's a whole narrative universe, and each part really makes sense only in the context of the whole.

Both Martha and Mary send word to Jesus. In verse 5, Mary is unnamed. We next see her at verse 19, when we learn that some from their community had come to console them in their deep grief. Then Martha goes off to have her personal encounter with Jesus while Mary stays home.

After that, Martha tags Mary and says, "You're it. Jesus is calling for you, specifically." He still does that today, of course. I have to ask myself: Am I listening? Are you?

Now Mary has reached Jesus, and I imagine her body language to be at odds with her words. Sure, to show respect and homage, she falls at Jesus' feet. ("Knelt" (v. 32

NRSV] is not really correct because it gives the impression of kneeling in worship as the magi did – *proskyneo*. In this instance, it's literally "fell or collapsed at his feet (*píptō*) and implies a force and desperation that is not as dignified and controlled as "knelt.") But Mary has an issue with Jesus, the same one Martha had: "Lord, *if only* you had been here, such and such would have gone differently, would have gone the way it *should* have." That's the last we hear from Mary until she anoints Jesus.

– Jamie Clark-Soles (*Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2016)

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### **Primary Sources:**

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