

Premature Burials

Edgar Allan Poe wrote a short story called "The Premature Burial". It turns out that the main character had a tendency at times to slip into a deep trance and worried that others might think he had died and bury him before he came out of it. And sure enough he does wake up one night thinking the thing he dreaded had happened. Poe works the consequent horror for all it's worth but only to have the terror stricken fellow discover he had simply fallen asleep within a dark, semi-enclosed berth or bunk installed in a fishing boat.

Of course in our Gospel reading Lazarus is actually dead and entombed until Jesus wakes him up. But may not this Gospel also be suggesting that the society into which we have been born can be a burial chamber for many – culturally suffocating. Poets and philosophers, especially in recent times, have considered it so. So, when Jesus shouts, "Roll away the stone!" and "Lazarus, come out!" may he not be addressing you or me or the whole world?

I think of scenes of the children in Somalia or parched and embattled regions of the Middle East – unfed, tormented by flies, thin to the breaking point, indoctrinated by one or another sectarianism, a centuries-old hatred of other tribes or religions . . . uneducated, recruited for whatever fanatical adults may intend, *actually* dead before they are thirty. Nor is such "interment" exclusive to children in the poorer parts of the world. People within even our sophisticated societies seem at times to be living six feet under a load of negatives (call it politics) that take all the joy out of life, age us early.

Over the many decades of our Republic many such quasi-buried souls, the have-nots of other lands, heard a voice calling: "Lazarus, come forth!" and migrated to this continent to live in liberty and expectation, maybe even in faith, hope and love. Millions. Including the forebears of a woman named Emma Lazarus (1849-1887) of old Jewish-American stock. She was a friend of another woman, Rose Hawthorne (daughter of Nathaniel the writer) who became Catholic and founded the Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne dedicated to care for incurable cancer victims.

Emma Lazarus (how appropriate a name for today) became a notable poet in the late 1800's amid a surge of immigration that carried us into the 20th century. Among her poems she wrote one that echoes the words spoken in today's Gospel "Take away the stone . . . Unbind him and let him go" with all the imperative force of Jesus himself. Of course she did so in her own words. You can find them on a plaque inside the foundation of our Statue of Liberty in her now famous sonnet *The New Colossus*. [Have you ever read the whole thing?]

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame, / With conquering limbs astride from land to land; / Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand / A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame / Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name / Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand / Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command / The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame. / "Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she / With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, / I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"