

The Raising of Lazarus

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ “Where have you laid him?” he asked.”, Come and see, Lord,” they replied. ³⁵ Jesus wept. ³⁶ Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ “Take away the stone,” he said. “But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad Odor, for he has been there four days.” ⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” John 11: 33-44

Here we read the story of the most dramatic, provocative miracle in John’s Gospel. Death does not have the same finality for Jesus as it does for others. In John’s sign, this is certainly the most dramatic. Those who have difficulty with the miraculous find themselves stumbling here. However, John’s whole Gospel aims to affirm that God has indeed intervened in the history of the world. An incarnational theology at once makes room for a story like this where God has power over natural human events.

Today we come to nothing less than the raising of a dead man back to life. Someone very dear to Jesus. His name was Lazarus, and he had two sisters, Mary and Martha. Jesus was very close to all three of them. He visited them often, stayed in their home; he would go there to rest, refuel, renew. When you read the New Testament, you find that among the disciples, Jesus was closest to Peter, James and John – and of them, he was closest to John. But outside of that circle, two people that seemed to put the most emotional energy into his tank, were Mary and Martha.

These two sisters are very close to Jesus and are central in the story. The women sent a report to Jesus not mentioning Lazarus by name referring to him as the “one you love”. ³ **So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.” John 11:3.** Jesus would know immediately who they mean. They are in a real dilemma and express regret that if only Jesus had come in time, Lazarus would not have died. ²¹ **“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died John 11:21.** They also know the considerable hostility of Jerusalem’s leadership toward Jesus and the associated risk he faced coming to them. When Jesus finally decided to go to Judea it must have been very frightening to his disciples. ⁸ **“But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?” John 11:8.**

When Jesus finally arrives, Lazarus has been dead for four days. This is significant. There was well a known Jewish belief that the soul of a dead person remained in the vicinity of the body hoping to re-enter it for three days. Once decomposition set in the soul departed. John wants us to know that Lazarus is really dead and this miracle can not be put down to resuscitation.

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Did you notice the language? He was “deeply moved” in spirit and “troubled,” He “wept,” and then again, we read a second time that he was “deeply moved.” The phrase “deeply moved” in the original Greek language is one that’s difficult to translate into English. Jesus is not just emotionally upset and full of grief and pain, he is angry. The Greek suggests an anger at the deepest level of his very being. He is not angry at Mary or Martha but at death itself and the devastation it brings. His only interest now is to locate the tomb and demonstrate God’s power over death.

As Jesus approached the tomb once again, he is deeply moved. The Greek is best translated as outrage at what he sees. ³⁹ **“Take away the stone,” he said. “But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad Odor, for he has been there four days.”** Martha warns Jesus that Lazarus has been dead for four days and there will be a strong smell as the body has begun to decompose. All this serves to remind us that Lazarus is truly dead.

Then Jesus prays. ⁴⁰ **Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.” John 11: 41-42.**

He prays publicly and looks up. His prayer is also for the benefit of the bystanders. This is done to demonstrate that his work is done in unison with God’s will. He never acts alone. ¹⁹ **Jesus gave them this answer: “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. John 5:19.**

Then we see the dramatic high point of the story. ⁴³ **When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” John 11: 43-44.**

Lazarus come out! The shepherd whose voice is recognised by his sheep, who calls them by name, who calls each one of us by name and who lays down his life for them, now calls Lazarus by name. The dead man comes out. This is the authority of a love that is willing to die.

When Lazarus emerges from the tomb, he is bound in grave wrappings, which were strips of fabric wound around his limbs and filled with burial spices. Jewish burials also tied the jaw closed and covered the cloth with a linen cloth.

Jesus issues a practical command, “take off the grave clothes and let him go”. Lazarus is literally set free, restored to physical life for a few more years, but assured of eternal life. What a spectacle it must have been witnessed by a growing crowd of people. Jews had strict laws about clean/unclean bodies and strict rituals of purifications. While the text is silent, we can imagine that Jesus who had a reputation for touching those deemed untouchable being among the very first to embrace his friend. This would have left the crowd stunned. The Lord of life demonstrates that he is victor over death while his enemies plot to take his life. The raising of Lazarus is the seventh and final sign of Jesus.

The story of Lazarus’ empty tomb anticipates the story of Jesus’ empty tomb. The Lord who has power over life has power over his own life too. ¹⁷ **The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. John 10:17.** If the raising of Lazarus is the final climatic sign of Jesus how much more will be his resurrection from the dead.

If the Lordship of Jesus over death is the chief theme in this chapter, the prospect of Jesus’ own crucifixion is a theme that follows close behind. The tomb that cannot hold Lazarus cannot hold him either. ⁵⁰ **You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” John 11:50.** Caiaphas tells us that the death of Jesus has a purpose. He will die for his people and the nation.

People living in Jerusalem refused to believe despite Jesus returning from the dead. The Bible is clear, words must accompany deeds. The sign points to Jesus and he must be preached. Any power is power in Christ. When Paul prays for the Ephesians at the beginning of his letter, he asks God to confirm in their hearts the features that come with an identity in Christ.

¹⁸ **I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength ²⁰ he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms.... Ephesians 1: 18-20.**

I am told that when tourists come to Jerusalem, one of the most important places for them to visit is the church commemorating Jesus’ burial and resurrection. Guidebooks written in English refer to it as “The Church of the Holy Sepulchre”. Apparently, Arabs and Jews are used to this, so when they find visitors wandering around Jerusalem’s Christian Quarter, they send them in the right direction. The ancient churches of Jerusalem have a different name for this church.

They have known it as “the Church of the Resurrection” recalling the really important events that happened there. The church recalls not the tomb but the resurrection life that came from this place. It is a place of victory and life not of sorrow and defeat.

We know that Jesus said, ²⁵ **Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” John 11: 25-26.**

That is why Jerusalem Christians are right in refusing to let their central church become a memorial to Jesus' death. It is not. It is a monument to the completed work of Jesus by which he embraces death fully and defeats it, standing triumphant before his own grave. The raising of Lazarus points us elsewhere reminding us that Jesus' work is greater even than this miracle.

Jesus did not impede this families grieving, instead by joining with them, he offers solidarity. It is right to describe death as terrible and painful without compromising the quality of our faith. Jesus himself cried at the wreckage death brought to this family. Of course, he also said, ⁴ **Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Matthew 5:4.** However, death will never have the final say over our lives. As L. Morris puts it in his commentary on John, **“Death is but a gateway to further life and fellowship with God”.**

He raised Lazarus from the dead. Giving the world a foretaste, a picture, of what was to come. What he was able to bring. What his life could hold for theirs. Not just resurrection in the life to come, but spiritual resurrection now. When Jesus asked Martha if she believed, He wasn't just saying, “Do you believe I can raise Lazarus from the dead before the great resurrection at the end of time?” He was saying, “Do you believe that faith in me brings life now, a relationship that will never end and that physical death cannot destroy?” Do you believe that no matter what happens in life, I am enough? And she said, “Yes. I do.” And that's when He raised Lazarus.

To let Mary and Martha know, and you and I know, that he really is the resurrection and the life and we can trust him that way. That's the heart of it all. You will face moments in your life, the most difficult, painful, confusing, heart-tearing, gut-wrenching, lifeshattering moments... Where you will have to ask yourself, “Is Jesus going to be enough?” Because He's all you'll have. Your trust in him, your hope in him, is all you'll have to hold on to.

So, in the end, this is a story about faith. A faith that may not know the answer to why things happen, but trusts in the one who does. A faith that believed Jesus could bring a brother back, even from the dead, but trusted Jesus – and loved Him – even if he didn't. A faith in a Jesus who knows the “why” of our life. Who weeps with our pain. ³² **Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” John 8:32.**