

“Lazarus Let Loose”

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John 11: 1-53

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Jesus' whole life was about setting people free and giving them life. He did it by teaching people, he did it when he healed people, and he did it when he brought others back to life.

Lazarus was the most dramatic example. Jesus loved Lazarus—they were close friends—and yet, even when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he didn't hurry over. He stayed where he was, and it seems he did it deliberately. Why?

At this time in Jesus' life and ministry, hostility from the religious authorities towards Jesus and his followers was increasing. The gospel of John talks about “the Jews” in an almost sinister way, but it does not refer to all Jews — simply to “the religious opposition”. After all, Jesus himself was a Jew, as were all of his disciples. But the gospel of John was written many years later than Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and during that time span, the Jewish leaders began to actively persecute the followers of Jesus, and Jesus himself.

Lazarus lives in Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem where the religious opposition is strong. Jesus seems to know that when he goes to that region, it will be a one-way trip. His disciples are also worried about going back to that area, and they don't think it's a good idea — they are afraid for Jesus' safety. Jesus keeps trying to help the disciples understand the suffering and the death and the resurrection that lie ahead, but they can't grasp it. It is interesting though that through all this, Thomas stands strongly with Jesus. You remember Thomas who gets the bad rap and the bad nick- name of “Doubting Thomas”? Here, Thomas is the one who seems to get what it's all about. *“Let us also go, that we may die with him”*- John 11:16.

But Jesus wasn't thinking of his own safety. His primary goal was to glorify God — to do God's will. And so a few days later Jesus walks towards Judea to bring Lazarus life and to hand himself over to death.

When he and the disciples finally got to the house where Martha, Mary and Lazarus lived, Lazarus had already died. I mentioned about Thomas' wonderful example of faith. It's worth pointing out Martha's faith statement. It is a really powerful statement of faith, right up there with the statement that Peter made when Jesus asked ‘Who do

you say that I am?’ and Peter responds ‘You are the Christ, the son of the Living God’. Here we have Martha as full of grief as she is, and as disappointed as she is that Jesus was not there earlier, making such powerful statements of faith:

*Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “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.”***

That is quite a statement to make on that side of the cross and before the resurrection. It seems to me that her faith is overlooked. It is also worth noting that in another time and place, Martha and Mary would almost certainly have been counted among his disciples. The culture of that time and place didn’t allow it, but their faith and service are exemplary.

Then her sister Mary comes to meet Jesus and again expresses her enormous grief and disappointment saying “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” I don’t know how you would have responded, but I think I might have been a little bit defensive if I’d arrived a little late and been blamed twice for letting my friend die. I would have at least tried to explain the bigger picture: that I was going to suffer and die as well. But Jesus doesn’t try to defend himself at all. Instead, he responds with total empathy and compassion. He lays down all his own worries and agendas and is just 100% present with Mary in her grief, allowing himself to feel that grief fully. Jesus may not have rushed back to alleviate her sorrow, but he stood with her in her grief.

I always remember from a Vacation Bible School I went to as a kid the verse: “**Jesus wept.**” (John 11:35.) We got points for memorizing verses of scripture and that’s one that everyone memorized because it’s the shortest verse in the Bible. But you know, it’s a good one to memorize. We don’t get through life without tears, and there are seasons of our life where there are a lot of tears. Never doubt or forget that Jesus knows your tears and is weeping with you.

Then Jesus goes over to the tomb where Lazarus lay dead. And he wasn’t just a little dead, he was a lot dead. He’d been in the tomb for 4 days. The tomb was starting to stink really badly. It took courage just to open that tomb.

We don't have to deal much with horrible smells in our scent-free society. I think it's one of the biggest differences from the time and place we live in, to places or most of history that didn't have refrigeration or lots of water for cleaning. We don't smell a lot of strong smells. Of course every once in a while; visiting my parents place on the river, the dog will find a nice, several-days-dead, fish to thoroughly roll in. It usually takes a couple of baths to get the smell out. Death stinks. It stinks on a physical level and it can really stink on a deeper heart level.

But Jesus wasn't put off by putrid places. Jesus said to Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life". Notice that resurrection is not just something Jesus does; it's something he is. Jesus *is* life and resurrection. It's interesting that Jesus brings Lazarus to life again. It's a pretty impressive thing to do. As far as miracles go, it's right up there. (Walking on water is neat, but this is on a whole other level if you ask me!)

But Jesus only does it a couple of times. It's pretty clear that he wasn't doing the funeral circuit—cashing in on the free sandwiches while he was at it. In the same way, although he healed many people, he wasn't a "Walking Medical Clinic". He healed some people but he didn't heal everyone. **Jesus didn't come to take away our pain, he came to give us life.** That's important to hear again: Jesus didn't come to make us comfortable, but to set us free and give us life. So many of our prayers revolve around helping us with our pain and our suffering and our grief. There is nothing wrong with praying for these and asking God to take away the pain, but just know that if you pray and it doesn't happen, it's not because you didn't pray right or have the right amount of faith; it just may not be a prayer that will be answered for you on this side of life. We are promised life. We are not promised the absence of pain or suffering.

Jesus was all about connecting and reconnecting us to the life source -- to our Creator. He came so that we could have life. He was all about breaking down the walls and setting us free from the things that keep us from really living. Jesus was God — a living, breathing life force — and I believe that sometimes he just couldn't help but restore life.

Jesus brought Lazarus back to life, and not just because he didn't want Lazarus to die. He was close to the family, and it's clear he felt the loss, but I don't think he brought Lazarus to life just to satisfy his pain or even Martha and Mary's, though that was indeed an amazing blessing.

I also don't think that awesome miracle was done to impress people or change the minds of those who didn't already believe. Miracles don't actually help skeptics. Skeptics will always find a way to dismiss a miracle. Not only did the skeptics not believe, but they went running to the religious

opposition. *This miracle was a significant turning point on this journey to the cross, as it becomes the last straw for those who see Jesus as a threat to their religion and their relationship with the Romans and so, as the scriptures says: "So from that day on they planned to put him to death."*

If he didn't do it to alleviate pain or to win friends and influence people, why did he bring Lazarus to life? I believe he did it as a trailer—as a prequel — to his own narrative. He kept trying to tell the disciples about his coming death and resurrection. He kept trying to show them who he really was, and this was one very dramatic way he did that. It wasn't for the non-believers — instead it was so that those who do believe would *understand*. Understand deep down that he was the resurrection and the life, and that he had come to bring not only Lazarus, but you and me to life.

Rev. Dr. John Claypool was a well-known Episcopal (Anglican) minister in the U.S. In a sermon years ago he told the story of a dream he once had. It was very close to Easter time, and he dreamed he had died. In his dream he found himself moving through a cool, dark tunnel. And



then he came out in what he could only describe as kindly light. He was accepted. He was embraced. He was welcomed. Suddenly a voice spoke his name and said, "Welcome. I have some questions I want to ask you."

He thought to himself, "Here is going to come a catalog of all the complaints against my living." But the voice said to him, "Can you weep for all the pain you've caused others and you've caused yourself; for the way you've abused power or neglected power; for the things you've done that you wish you hadn't done and the things you have left undone you wish you had done?"

John Claypool said he began to remember many of the things in life for which he had deep regret and there was a powerful sense of sadness in his being.

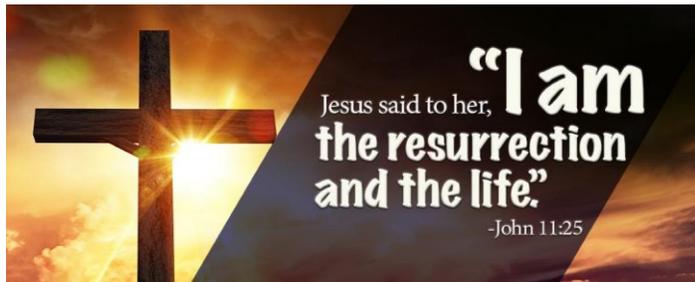
But then the voice said, "Let me ask you a second thing. Can you laugh at all the funny stories that you heard, all the hilarious things that you've witnessed, and the good things that have happened?" He began to think about all of the goodness and mercy that he'd experienced. A great sense of laughter began to well up deep from within him and it seemed as if God Himself was laughing about him. But then when the laughter had died

down the voice said, "I have another question to ask you. Do you want any more of it, this life that I want to give you? Do you want more of it?"

Claypool said he remembers thinking there's nothing automatic about this answer. "Here's the pain of life. Here's the wonder of life. Do I want more of this bittersweet reality that I have experienced? From somewhere deep within me the words rose up, 'Yes, yes, I do want more of it.'"

And with that the light said, "Welcome. That's what I want to give you. It is my good pleasure to give you life abundant. Therefore, enter into the joy of your Lord."

And at that, in the dream, he says he seemed to plunge further and deeper into a great ocean of light.



Do you want more of it, this life that Jesus wants to give you? It is not just for some of you. It's for everyone. It's for you! Jesus said: "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." Jesus has come to bring you life—real abundant life here and now. You do not need to fear death and even more than that, you do not need to fear life!