

Do You Believe This?

John 11

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This account in John 11 about Jesus' raising his friend Lazarus from the dead shows us the power of Jesus, the glory of God, the importance of faith, and the victory of life.

I came across two descriptions of the tomb of Lazarus that's shown to visitors to the Jerusalem area. I tried to remember if I saw it when I was in Israel. If I did, I didn't go all the way into it like the people I read about did.

One description of Lazarus' tomb comes from Ed Dobson, a pastor in Grand Rapids, MI, who had ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease):

Near Bethany in Israel, I once visited a place called Lazarus's tomb, where you can walk down a winding stone staircase into a cave at the bottom that leads to a deep, dark, first-century tomb. You can crawl in and find yourself confined in that narrow, dark space. [That's why I didn't go in there.]

When the doctor said, "You will lose your ability to walk, to sit up, to swallow, to breathe, and all we can do is help you manage the pain," I went through several months where I felt like I was in Lazarus' tomb—cold, dark, trapped. (LEADERSHIP, Fall 2001, p. 30)

The other reference to Lazarus' tomb in Bethany is in Barbara Brown Taylor's book *God in Pain*. She describes going down winding steps to a small round opening in a rock wall. A person has to bend almost double to get in. Getting out requires a lot of squirming and twisting. "If it really is Lazarus's tomb, then he did not come out of it like a man walking out of prison. He came out of it like a baby being born again. ...It must have been absolutely terrifying for him and for everyone else—everyone but Jesus that is..." (66).

Let's walk through this story, getting into the tomb with Lazarus or standing beside it with his sisters and the neighbors and Jesus' disciples. As Jesus tells Martha, if we believe we will see the glory of God.

1-3 Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are from Bethany, a little less than two miles east of Jerusalem. They're good friends of Jesus'. He seems to have stayed with them in Bethany on several occasions.

When Jesus gets word that Lazarus is sick, he's with his disciples about thirty miles away across the Jordan River. The Jewish leaders had recently threatened to stone Jesus to death, but he had escaped with his disciples.

4-16 After hearing that his good friend is sick, Jesus waits two more days before saying, "Let's go back to Judea." His disciples can't believe it. The last time they were there the religious leaders had tried to kill Jesus.

But Jesus knew we have to work while it's daylight. We need to do God's will while we can and take advantage of the opportunities God gives. Until his "hour" Jesus is perfectly safe. So he continues the work he has to do until the "hour" of his suffering, death and resurrection.

Jesus anticipated the revelation of God's glory that would come because of Lazarus' sickness. Jesus wouldn't be forced into action. The Father's will was his guide. He responds to calls for help—in his own time.

Jesus knew Lazarus was dead but he also knew he was going to perform the last glorious "sign" that would help his disciples believe.

Thomas shows the same rashness the others will show at the Last Supper when he says, "Let us go and die with him." Yet Thomas and the other disciples are moving in the right direction.

vv. 17-57 By the time Jesus gets to Bethany, Lazarus has been dead four days. Jesus doesn't go into the village, but sends word to Martha and meets her outside town.

I once read a novel about Martha entitled *I Came to Love You Late*. In this scene when Martha comes out to meet Jesus, he hugs her. That really helped me see the humanity of Jesus as well as his compassion.

Martha says to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Both love and blame are in that statement. When have you faced loss and wondered where Jesus was or why he wasn't doing something about it? Or, imagine Lazarus dying disappointed because Jesus didn't come to him. Sometimes we feel it, but we can barely bring ourselves to say, "God, where were you when I needed you?"

But Martha goes on, "Yet even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask." What's she hinting at?

Jesus says, "Your brother will rise again." Martha thinks he's just giving some words of comfort and she replies, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." She's saying, "I know there will be a resurrection *someday*."

But Jesus says, "*I am the resurrection and the life*. Do you believe this?"

And even in her disappointment and confusion, Martha makes a great confession of faith: "Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Messiah/Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." This is exactly the purpose for the writing of John's gospel as stated in 20:31. Do we have a faith that can keep believing God's word and keep looking for God's purposes even through our disappointment? Martha's a good example of this.

Martha then goes to get Mary and she comes out to meet Jesus. The people from Jerusalem who had come to console the sisters in their loss assumed Mary was going out to the tomb, so they followed her out. When Mary got to the place where Jesus was, she fell at his feet. In the gospels, Mary is always at the feet of Jesus—listening to him or honoring him. But even Mary raises the same question and struggle Martha expressed: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Jesus sees Mary and the others weeping and wailing and he is deeply moved and troubled. The word here expresses *anger*. It's used sometimes to describe Jesus' reaction to sickness. Not that Jesus is angry with the person who is sick or who dies. But he's angry at sickness and death, the enemies, the representatives of Satan's kingdom. Shuddering with this anger, Jesus asks, "Where have you placed Lazarus?"

"Come and see, Lord," they reply.

Now Jesus sheds tears. Jesus weeps at the grave of his friend. Jesus stands with us in our times of loss, he stands besides those lonely graves with us, sharing our loss, feeling our pain, weeping with us.

Some in the crowd say, "Look how much he loved Lazarus." Others say, "Well, if he could heal a blind man [9:6, 7] couldn't he have kept Lazarus from dying?" This is now the third time someone has mentioned

that Jesus could have kept Lazarus from dying if he hadn't delayed coming back from the wilderness. Brown Taylor says, "Everyone in this story is focused on preventing death, while Jesus is focused on outliving it" (68).

Jesus is once more greatly disturbed and angry. He comes to the tomb and says, "Take away the stone." The tomb is a kind of cave with a round stone blocking the entrance. Martha, ever the practical one, says, "Lord, he's been in there four days. There's bound to be a bad odor." Jesus replies, "Didn't I tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" I imagine Martha nodding to some servants or neighbors and they roll the stone away.

Then Jesus prays. He acknowledges his dependence on the Father in the presence of the people gathered around. He wants them to know whose glory is being shown in this miracle. He's showing again that he does only what he sees his Father doing and that he says only what he hears from his Father.

Then Jesus calls in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus, who has perhaps been resting in the bosom of Abraham (the Jews' term for the place of the righteous in the afterlife), hears the voice of his friend and Lord. And he wakes up in the close, dark space of his tomb. Then he struggles out of the tomb, barely able to move because of the strips of linen wrapped around him. But somehow he squirms his way out of the tomb and makes his way out in front of everybody. And Jesus says, "Unbind him and let him go." When Jesus calls us to come alive he sets us free.

Many of those folks from Jerusalem who had come to the tomb with Mary, seeing what Jesus did, now put their faith in him. But some of them go to the Pharisees and tell them what Jesus has done. This leads to a meeting of the Ruling Council where a plot to kill Jesus begins. The next death we read about in John is the death of Jesus.

We look at Lazarus' story in the light of Jesus' own resurrection. Looking at this story now gives us a preview of where we're headed through Lent. Jesus himself is the resurrection and the life for all who believe in him. Jesus gives spiritual life now (this is one of John's themes, 1:4; 3:16; 4:14; 5:24-29). Jesus will raise the physically dead at the last day (5:25-29).

Raising Lazarus is a sign of Jesus' giving spiritual life to those who are spiritually dead because of sins (Ephesians 2:4-7). It also points to how he will raise from the dead those who believe in him.

I am the resurrection—whoever believes in me will live, even though they die.

I am the life—whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Christ is the resurrection and the life. To be in him is to be raised from the dead and to be alive.

Jesus gives eternal life—right now—to those who place their faith and trust in him. He resurrects us from the tomb of separation from God, the tomb of the broken relationships with those around us, the tombs of fear and pride and so on. What tomb holds you in its darkness? What hopes and dreams of yours lie buried while you wonder where God is and what God is doing?

Being alive in Christ now guarantees that we'll be alive with him in the age to come. We'll share in Christ's resurrection. That's the model for the life to come. Lazarus' resurrection was temporary. He had to go through death again some time. But Jesus' resurrection is unique. He's alive forever. And those who have faith in him have a share in his resurrection. We experience the power of Christ's resurrection now, in spiritual life and in occasional healings. These experiences guarantee and point toward our own resurrection when Jesus returns.

Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life. He demonstrated that by raising Lazarus. Christ himself rose from the dead. He gives life to those who trust him now. Redemption will be complete when he raises us spirit and body to the life everlasting.

Fred Craddock told a real life parable that shows how this faith helps us when death comes and how the power of Jesus even transforms death:

A colleague of mine down at Phillips University, a young woman, taught physical education. She was a marvelous person, young, vigorous, unmarried. One night she was sitting in her apartment grading papers, and she heard a knock at the door. She went to the door, unlocked it, opened it, and there stood death, with his yellow

face staring right at her. She slammed the door, locked it, and called the doctor. He said, "Malignant." She had surgery. A few months later she was back, and I said, "Hey, you're looking good." She said, "I never felt better." Now, she had lost some weight, but she was back teaching physical education, bouncing on trampolines and all, doing great. Everything seemed to be wonderful.

She was at home one night watching television when she heard a knock at the door. She went to the door, opened it, and there he stood with his yellow face. She slammed it and locked it and called the doctor. He said, "Chemotherapy." Oh, she was sick. All her hair came out, so she got a wig, and she came back to school. I said, "That's becoming. You should have been wearing that all along." She said, "I feel pretty good." And she was teaching again.

One night she was sitting there grading papers in her room, and she heard a knock, so she went to the door, unlocked it, and there he stood, old death with his yellow face. She slammed the door and tried to lock it, but the lock was broken. She called her friends and relatives. Everybody leaned against the door; we leaned against the door. We even got to where we were joking and laughing, "We're not going to let him in. We'll keep him out." We'd look out the window, and there he sat under a tree with his yellow face right out there.

One night she said, "Get away from the door."

"What?"

"Get away from the door." So we got away from the door, and he came in. I felt sorry for him. He likes to come in with his fiery darts of pain and fear. There he stood; in one hand he had peace, in the other, rest. He looked like a servant of God.

Oh, I know there are people who say, "Well, it's too bad you lost your friend," and it's true. But I heard the whisper in there as we gathered at the church a couple of days later and the congregation stood in great throng and sang "Now Thank We All Our God." It was a shouted whisper. (*Craddock Stories* 38-39)

One time in a Bible study, the study book included this question: Describe a time when you felt such wonder at the majesty of creation that you could only praise God. As we went around we said the things you'd typically think of: sunsets, mountains, the birth of our children. Then one woman said, "Death." We kind of looked at her. Then she explained that as a Hospice nurse she was with a lot of people when they died. And often she saw peace and faith and a family coming together. She observed that even people who don't usually express faith or talk much about God tend to talk that way when someone they love dies.

That's part of the power of Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life. He makes even the last enemy, death, his servant to bring his people home. That's part of the power of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

I recently read this in an online devotional (J. D. Walt, *The Seedbed Daily Text*):

I am indebted to the British theologian, Jeremy Begbie, for this insight from one of his lectures where he said, "Christians do not hope 'in' the future. We hope 'from' the future." In other words, we aren't hoping everything is going to turn out ok in the end. We live as those who have already won. The future is a settled matter. Because of Jesus, the future is as fixed as the Sun. Our hope is not rooted in our hopefulness. It is securely anchored in the settled future. We hope "from" the future. (<https://www.seedbed.com/step-3-take-long-view/>)

Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" If you do believe, you're about to see the glory of God. Can we say, "Yes, Lord, I believe. I believe you. I trust you. I depend on you"?