

Lazarus! Come Out of the Grave!

A death in the family. A death of a friend.

Everyone of us will experience this. Thomas Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" states that the paths of glory lead but to the grave. Our materialistic culture wants to deny death and hide it from public attention. Yet everyday the newspaper carries an obituary column, stories about murders, fatal accidents, assassinations, suicides, wars, executions, lethal tragedies of all kinds.

Secular philosophers pronounce death absurd, but proceed to draw from death the principle, "Live life to the fullest." Revolutions in medical science have created life support systems that raise new moral and legal debates about the limits of prolonging life. What constitutes "extraordinary means" in this technological age? Death raises financial questions about writing wills, the costs of funerals, cemetery plots, and the advisability of cremation. Death reaches into every aspect of life: religious, moral, financial, legal, philosophical, and social.

It is better to think about death than to deny it. Death should never be an "X-rated topic." One person may look at death and see in it a challenge to make meaning out of life. Another will ponder death and be motivated to expand life's possibilities. Yet again someone will meditate on death and discover deep reserves of hope within the human spirit.

The poet Dylan Thomas looked at death and said that we should not go gentle into that good night. We should "rage, rage against the dying of the light." Those words capture our survival instincts and speak to everyone's profound will to hold onto life. Yet this poet also echoed one of the greatest of biblical teachings:

*And death shall have no dominion
Dead men naked, they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon...
Though they sink through the sea, they shall rise again.*

St. Paul said it of Jesus this way, “Death no longer has power over him” (Romans 6:9). An even better text is Paul’s entire fifteenth chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians, where he lyrically celebrates the revelation of Christ’s resurrection and our own.

Facing the reality of death will be easier when we take seriously its impact on helping us live our lives to the full. Looking death in the face becomes even more valuable when we see it as a door to eternal life, a transition from this form of life to the next. Our funeral liturgy states that life is changed, not taken away. Some of today’s self help literature promises happiness through techniques that deter us from looking squarely at pain, tragedy, and death. Instead of going through the sorrow, we are encouraged to run around it. This approach views life as a headache quickly cured by an aspirin. But much of life is a heartache, not easily remedied by a technique pill.

Death is a teacher whose ultimate lesson is that we cannot run away from problems. Just as we cannot avoid death, neither can we dodge responsibilities and agonies. And when looked at with faith, death also teaches there is another life ahead of us. This is the magnificent lesson of John’s account of the resurrection of Lazarus. Christ’s stupendous miracle forecasts his permanent resurrection from the death which he will experience at Easter and make possible for all of us.

Jesus Hears of the Death of Lazarus (John 11:1-16)

When Jesus cured the man born blind, he demonstrated that he was indeed the *Light* of the world.

When he raised Lazarus from the dead he made concrete his claim to be the *Life* of the world.

Three of Jesus’ dearest friends were Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus from the village of Bethany. This community is just on the other side of the Mount of Olives about two miles from Jerusalem. Bethany means “house of poverty.” Lazarus had contracted a serious illness and his sisters sent a message to Jesus about this. Jesus replied that his friend’s illness would not end with death. It would become an occasion for the greatest manifestation of the Word’s glory-presence, first in the resurrection of Lazarus and above all in the cross.

In John’s gospel the supreme revelation of the glory-presence of the Word become flesh takes place at the cross. The lifting up to death becomes also his lifting up to resurrected life. Sequentially, the death comes first and then the resurrection, but even in the dying and death of Jesus, the Love of God is felt profoundly. From the cross radiated the irresistible glory of God. That is why the suffering and the poor of every age have stood at the cross. They see God already in the crucified. They feel the identity of God with all human tragedy.

John makes it clear that Jesus has a special affection for Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. He loved them. Yet he delayed going to see them for two days. Jesus thereby will dispel all doubt about the death of Lazarus. He will have been buried. Not in a coma. He would have been dead a long enough time so that rabbinic authorities would have said his soul had left his body and decay would definitely have begun. The Lazarus miracle, therefore, will be a sign that Jesus is the source of life evident in his resurrection.

When Jesus finally announced that they would go to Judea, the apostles objected that it was too dangerous. He had just escaped a stoning threat at the Dedication festival. Why put himself in danger? He replied with a rhetorical question. “Are there not twelve hours in a day?” (verse 9). Yes, there is time each day to accomplish our goals *and* God’s will. The flow of time is inexorable. We can waste it. We can use it profitably. By the Incarnation, Jesus accepted the limitations of time, but also filled his allotted time with obedience to his Father’s will.

Next came a typical Johannine conversation. Jesus says something that has a double meaning. His listeners misunderstand him. He then clarifies his meaning. He said that Lazarus was asleep. The apostles replied that if he were just resting, there was no reason to be alarmed or to endanger Christ’s security. Jesus cleared up their misunderstanding by saying bluntly, “Lazarus had died” (verse 14). John notes that Thomas, who had a second name in Greek – Didymus, meaning twin – touchingly roused the group with his exhortation, “Let us go also and die with him” (verse 16). He was beginning to understand that witnessing to Jesus through personal, courageous behavior was the key to being credible when preaching Christ’s message. His heart was in the right place, but like all the apostles, save John, he would falter during the passion and become the most prominent apostolic doubter of the resurrection. Still, by the grace of Jesus, Thomas would be brought to faith and use words often prayer ever since by the devout when adoring Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, “My Lord and my God.”

The Mourning Martha Meets Jesus (John 11:17-27)

By the time Jesus arrived at the tomb of Lazarus, his friend had been in the tomb four days. Burial followed death swiftly in that climate. The body was wrapped in a shroud and laid in a niche in a room carved from rock. Sweet spices and oils were applied to the corpse to offset the smell of decay. A round stone was rolled against the door of the grave.

Women led the funeral procession. Usually, some memorial talks were given at the grave. The friends stood in two lines outside the grave as the mourning family members left the tomb and walked between them back to their home. Friends brought prepared foods for a funeral meal after the burial. The official mourning period was seven days. The family stayed at home, receiving a constant stream of visitors and gifts of food. Often Jewish families do the same today, calling this custom “sitting shiva.”

Jesus would have come on the scene in the middle of the mourning period. The ever active Martha left the house to meet Jesus, while Mary stayed there. She said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Even now, I know whatever you ask of God, God will give you” (verse 22). There is a tone of reproach in her words. Why did he wait? Why was he so late in coming? At the same time she displayed a remarkable faith in him that he could reverse what had happened.

Once again we have the Johannine conversation. Jesus told her that Lazarus will rise again. Misunderstanding him, she replied that she knew he would rise on the last day. The Pharisees taught this doctrine in opposition to the disbelief of the Sadducees. This teaching about resurrection arose late in Jewish history, around the second century before Christ. It was widely accepted by the common people of Christ’s time.

Jesus cleared up what he meant. “I AM the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, even if he die, will live” (verse 25). Martha thought of resurrection as a long postponed event in the misty future of the world’s end. She did not realize that the resurrection stood before her. Jesus is not talking about a series of reincarnations into successive life forms, but a unique one-time resurrection from the dead. He will die. So also will Christians and all people. Faith in him will bring a resurrection to eternal life. The intensity of this revelation, so new and so startling, evoked a confession of faith from Martha, one that sounded just like Peter’s at Caesarea Philippi. “I have come to believe you are the messiah, the Son of God” (verse 27). The Martha who had been “busy about many things” showed she was truly capable of extraordinary faith.

Mary Meets Jesus – and Then, the Miracle (John 11:28-44)

Mary is brought to see Jesus. She repeats the same words as her sister. Up to this point, the text deals with death in solemn discourse, doctrinal teaching and faith statements. Only when Mary comes and kneels at the feet of Jesus and weeps do we get the feeling we are with a grieving family. Finally Jesus was portrayed as being “perturbed and deeply troubled” (verse 34). When he saw tomb, Jesus responded with grief. “And Jesus wept” (verse 35).

Jesus was able to feel with Martha and Mary the sense of loss they were experiencing. He himself had lost a friend and showed his sorrow. As he looked at the grave “an involuntary groan burst from him and he trembled with deep emotion.”*

*Barclay, William, *The Gospel of John*, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), p. 96.

Jesus was capable of the deepest feelings and unashamed to make them known. He knew how to mourn and to console those who needed his presence and personal strength.

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine wrote of his difficulty in expressing grief at the death of his mother Monica. “Sorry flowed into my heart and would have overflowed into tears. But my eyes, under my mind’s strong constraint, held back their flow. I stood dry eyed.”

He went on to say that his friends stayed with him, but wondered if he lacked all human feeling. “I was ashamed that these human emotions should have power over me.” It took him several days before he was able to permit himself to show sorrow. When he did, he said, ‘I found consolation in weeping.’

Jesus wept for his dear friend Lazarus and out of compassion for Martha and Mary, He also “shuddered, moved with the deepest emotion” * at the very fact of death and the reality of sin that brought death into the world. In coming to terms with death and his own reaction to it at the grave of Lazarus, Jesus was even more determined to rid the world of sin and its consequences.

*Brown, Raymond, *The Gospel According to John*, Vol. 1 (Garden City, NY; Doubleday, 1966), p. 421.

His solution was a love that would conquer death. As he stood at the door of Lazarus’ tomb, weeping, the onlookers said, “See how he loved him” (verse 36). How right they were. Jesus’ love surged within him and outward to the grave. Love rose from his heart like the waves from the sea. That love assumed resurrection power and informed his voice as he roared at death, “Lazarus, come forth!” And Lazarus emerged from the grave.

Jesus performed a miracle that foreshadowed his own resurrection as well as ours. All such resurrections can only come after going through the experience of death. Jesus would have his own Good Friday before his experience of Easter. The essential resurrection is one that brings us eternal life and love and happiness. Lazarus was brought back from the dead to temporary life in this world. He would die again, much as a critically ill person is saved on an operating table, thus purchasing several more years of life, but eventually dying of another cause.

Our Resurrection to Life Before We Die

However there is a deeper truth at stake here. Jesus told Martha he was the resurrection *and the life*. The image of resurrection makes us think of our bodies coming alive again in the future life, as we say in the creed, “I believe in the resurrection of the body.” And that is a true teaching. But there is also “the life.” This life is divine life, divine Love. It is eternal life, absolutely ebullient with Love.

“The life” is the life we have after we die and live with God, even though our bodies have not yet risen. But, more to the point, this is the life and love we have even now before we die. In baptism, the Eucharist, and the other sacraments we are initiated into the life of the resurrection – eternal life, divine life, everlasting Love. We do not need to wait until we die to “rise from the dead.” What Jesus is saying is that resurrection from the death of a soul due to sin is his major gift to us. That resurrection is needed here even before we die.

All the miracles in John point to resurrection life here in this world as the necessary prelude to enjoying it in the next world. The wine miracle at Cana and the bread miracle on the mountain speak of the Eucharist that gives us risen life now. The cure of the official's son, the healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda are symbols of the new life we need for our souls. The resurrection of Lazarus is the most dramatic of the miracles that speak of Jesus as our resurrection – and our life.

This life is the theme that ties together Christ's dialogue with Nicodemus, his conversation with the Samaritan woman, his discourse on the Bread of Life. It is the central point of his declaration about his being the Living Water and the Light of the World at Tabernacles. His farewell discourse at the Last Supper will explore this teaching even more expansively.

For the Sake of the Nation This Jesus Must Die (John 11:45-57)

Jesus has just given life. The Sanhedrin met and concluded that he must die. Caiphas said, "It is better for you that one man should die instead of the people" (verse 50). The Passover will soon begin. Christ's enemies want to crush him completely. "This Jesus must die!" is the cry of his enemies. A miracle of life is cited as the last straw in demanding his death.