

“The Resurrection and the Life”

Ezekiel 37:1-14 • Psalm 130 • Romans 8:6-11 • John 11:1-45

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Today we come to one of the most significant miracles of Jesus, and probably also his last: the raising of his friend Lazarus from the dead. The story is only told in the Gospel of John, and it directly leads to the decision of the Jewish leaders to put Jesus to death. It sets the stage for the events of Holy Week. It is not a coincidence that we are reading this story on the final Sunday before Palm Sunday.

“Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.” This village was located close to Jerusalem; John says it was “some two miles away.” If you start in Jerusalem and head southeast, over the crest of Mount of Olives, you will come to the village of Bethany. You can’t make that journey directly today; the great barrier wall that separates Israel from the West Bank is in the way. You have to go a long way around. Today the Palestinian city of Al-Eizariya stands where the ancient village of Bethany once stood; it is a city of some 22,000 people, and the name of the city literally means, “the place of Lazarus.” You can visit Lazarus’s tomb here.

Lazarus only appears in the Gospel of John, but his sisters Mary and Martha also show up in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus spends quite a bit of time in their house. It appears that he was particularly close to these two sisters and their brother; they may have been the closest thing he had to friends.

But Lazarus was ill. *Deathly* ill. Mary and Martha send a message to Jesus: “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” “But,” John tells us, “when Jesus heard it, he said, ‘This illness does not lead to death; rather, it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.’ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.” Jesus does not go rushing off to help his friend who is suffering. Why not? Because what Jesus is allowing to happen will show people the glory of God.

Lazarus dies. Mary and Martha are devastated. And Jesus is nowhere to be found. But he *knows* when Lazarus is dead. He tells his disciples that it is time to go to Judea, the region where Jerusalem and Bethany are. “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep,” he says, “but I am going there to awaken him.” The disciples take Jesus at his word – that Lazarus has simply *fallen asleep* – but Jesus clarifies: “Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.”

Jesus and his disciples arrive in Bethany. Mary and Martha are receiving many guests who are offering their condolences. Martha hears that Jesus is coming and rushes to meet him. She greets him with these accusatory words: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Jesus *could* have arrived in time. But he didn’t. She’s hurt, and she’s angry. Jesus says to her: “Your brother will rise again.” Martha replies: “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” She’s talking about what is called the “general” or “universal” resurrection, the belief that God will raise

all the dead on a day in the future that the Creator will choose. Many Jews in the time of Jesus believed in the general resurrection, and it remains a central tenet of Jewish faith to this very day.

But Jesus says to Martha: “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 is declaring that *he* possesses full authority over death, full *divine* authority over death. It is not only the case that God will raise all people on the last day, as Martha believed, and as the apostle Paul himself believed, when he said “there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous” (Acts 24:15). Christianity, like Judaism, affirms that *everyone* will be raised. Our classic creeds, like the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, affirm the “resurrection of the dead” and the “resurrection of the body.” But what Jesus is saying is that *he* holds the power of resurrection. Eternal life is in *his* hands. Martha had said to him, “I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” She’s not quite right. It’s not that *God* will do whatever Jesus asks of him. It’s that *Jesus himself* has *full authority* over life and death. Jesus asks Martha if she believes him. “Yes, Lord,” she says; “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” She may not yet fully *understand* – but she *believes*.

Martha summons Mary. Mary kneels at the feet of Jesus and greets him with the *exact same words* that Martha had greeted him with: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” She, like Martha, blames Jesus for fact that her brother is dead. She is crying; her friends are crying; even Jesus himself starts to cry. It’s one of the shortest verses in the Bible: “Jesus began to weep” – or, in the King James, simply: “Jesus wept.” So much power, so much emotion, in a mere two words. Even our Lord and Savior, God incarnate, can be moved to tears. His *humanity* is in full view. Remember that, when you are suffering, or grieving. Jesus might well be weeping right alongside you. This is not a God who is aloof from the cares of the world. This is a God who cares – *immensely*.

They arrive at the tomb. “It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.” Jesus tells them to remove the stone. Martha – who believes, but does not yet fully understand – objects. Lazarus’s body has been in that tomb for four days now. It’s going to smell *really bad* in there! Jesus pulls her aside: “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” How often are we like Martha – believing, but not yet fully understanding, not yet fully comprehending what *Jesus can do*?

The people who have gone to the tomb with Jesus remove the stone. I wonder what they were thinking. *What’s he going to do? Are we really going to see the glory of God?* Jesus looks up to heaven and prays: “Father, I thank you for having heard me.” It’s a prayer of thanksgiving. But it’s a prayer with a bit of an ulterior motive, for Jesus says: “I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” He wants to make sure people understand that he is acting with *God’s* authority. He is not setting himself *against* God, or claiming power from God without God’s permission. No, God has given him *full authority* to do what he is about to do. “When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth.”

For Jesus *is* the resurrection and the life. *Jesus* has the power to raise people from the dead.

Starting from the very earliest centuries of the church, Christians have tried to capture this moment in art. I want to show you a few of the many artistic renderings of this miracle. This one is from a sixth-century mosaic in Ravenna, Italy. You are looking at art that is *fourteen centuries* old. Here is a painting by the Italian artist Duccio, in the early 1300s. This is a Byzantine icon from about the year 1400. Here’s a Russian icon from the 15th century. This painting is by Michelangelo, in the early 1600s. Here’s Rembrandt’s version, about 20 years later. Here is one by the English poet William

Blake, in 1800. This is the one that's on your bulletin cover, by the French artist Léon Bonnat, in 1857. Here's one by the Danish artist Carl Bloch, in 1875. This one is by van Gogh, in the late 1900s. And I could go on. All of these artists – and many more – have tried to capture this *glorious* moment.

Jesus tells the crowd to unbind Lazarus and let him go. John says: “Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.” But, as I said at the outset, this miracle gets reported to the Jewish leaders. They call a meeting. “What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.” Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest, suggests: “it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” So “from that day on they planned to put him to death.” For Jesus, it is the beginning of the end.

But for Lazarus, it is the first day of the rest of his life. A little while later, six days before Passover, Jesus returns to this house, and dines with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The Jewish leaders hear that Jesus is with Lazarus, and they begin plotting to kill him too, “since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.” But they never succeed in doing that. We don't hear anything further about Lazarus in the pages of the New Testament, but early Christian tradition holds that he lived a long time after this. There are two primary legends about Lazarus. One of them – the Eastern Orthodox version – says there continued to be plots against Lazarus after Jesus was raised from the dead. He fled Judea, traveling by boat to the island of Cyprus, in the Mediterranean Sea. He became the first bishop of a city called Kition, and after thirty years he died and was buried for a second – and final – time. That city is called Larnaca today. There is even a tomb that was found in Larnaca eleven centuries ago, bearing the inscription: “Lazarus friend of Christ.” If you're ever in Cyprus, go to Larnaca and visit this church, the Church of Saint Lazarus.

Alternatively, a Western legend says that Lazarus, Mary, and Martha were all forced to leave Judea; they were put into a boat “without sails, oars, or helm.” But God was with them, and their ship made it all the way across the Mediterranean Sea to Gaul, what is now modern France. They separate and start preaching the Gospel. Lazarus goes to Marseille, converts many, and becomes the city's first bishop. But when the Emperor Domitian launched a persecution against Christians, Lazarus was captured, and beheaded. His body was buried in a city called Autun. If you're ever in central France, go to the Autun Cathedral, which was built on the site where Lazarus is said to have been buried.

I have no idea whether either one of those stories is true. But what I do know is that Lazarus did eventually die. He died not once but twice. Just because Jesus raised him from the dead didn't mean he escaped death entirely. None of us gets that privilege. There will come a day, for each one of us, when we will take our last breath on this earth. That's not something we need to be afraid of. Granted, the process of dying might not be so fun. There might be some suffering. That's not really my department. Thank God for medical professionals, and for medications that can relieve pain.

But what I *can* tell you is that there is *no reason to be afraid of death itself*. When that moment finally comes for each of us, *we have no reason to be scared, or worried, or afraid*. Why? Because *Jesus is the resurrection and the life*. Jesus has power over death. The grave couldn't hold Lazarus, and it couldn't hold Jesus, and it won't hold you or me. As Jesus himself said: “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” There will be a resurrection for you and for me. Because of Jesus, because of our faith and trust in him, it will be a *good* resurrection. No, scratch that. It won't just be a *good* resurrection. It will be ... *glorious*.

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