

Out of the Tomb

John 11

One of the most prominent objections to Christianity is death. In most people's experience, once someone dies, they stay dead. Pop culture's obsession with vampires and zombies notwithstanding, the dead don't come back. That's the way things work now, that's the way things have worked as long as anyone can remember. Once someone is placed in a tomb, they don't come out.

There are several accounts of people being raised from the dead in the Bible. Jesus raised the son of a widow in Nain, a town near Nazareth in Galilee, where Jesus grew up. Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd are walking past town when they happen upon a funeral procession. Instead of just walking by, Jesus has compassion on this woman who has now lost her son, her only means of support after her husband's death. Jesus touches the bier, the stretcher used to carry the body. The son sits up and begins to talk to his mother. Jesus gives new life to the son, and to the widow, who was dependent on her son for everything she had. Jesus doesn't like funerals, and ruins the ones he attends.

Jesus also raised the daughter of Jairus, who was a ruler of the synagogue. Jesus the healer arrives seemingly too late to do anything, but he takes her hand, tells her to rise, and she does. Death was no match for Jesus. Her funeral was ruined before it could even begin to be planned.

In the Gospel of John, the last of the miracles that Jesus performs is the raising of Lazarus. Jesus and his disciples first hear that Lazarus is deathly ill. Then we find out Lazarus has died. By the time Jesus and the disciples get there, Lazarus was dead and buried with a stone rolled

in front of the tomb, and that was the end. That was the final fact that couldn't be changed. Lazarus was in the tomb, and was not coming out.

When Jesus and his disciples get to Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, the mourning continues. Martha, if you remember from when we read about her elsewhere in the gospels, always had to be doing something. When Jesus had visited their house in happier times, Martha was the one running around the kitchen, straightening the towels in the guest bathroom, being the perfect hostess. And here, again, she has to be doing something. She runs out to meet Jesus as soon as she hears that he is coming. She comes to him and immediately confronts him. "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (John 11:21)

As the conversation begins, Martha seems to be on top of things. She has the right answers, even in her grief. "I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask" (John 11:22). "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (John 11:24). "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world" (John 11:27). All good answer. All correct answers. Yet all incomplete answers. Because when we jump ahead a bit and Jesus tells them to roll the stone away, Martha's response is one of disbelief. "But, Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days" (John 11:39). Martha knew who Jesus was, knew what he could do, but could still not reconcile that with the facts that had been staring her in the face for four days. Lazarus was dead. To Martha, that was the end of the story.

Mary sees the same thing. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:32). The only words she speaks in this story are words of accusation. For Mary, too, that was the end of the story. Jesus had come too late. Lazarus was dead, and there was nothing anyone could do about it. Lazarus’ story was already over, and what happened next wouldn’t matter to him.

Jesus stands in front of the tomb of Lazarus, and commands the stone to be rolled away, over Martha’s objections. And once that is done, Jesus shouts into the tomb, “Lazarus, come out!” And, still wrapped in his grave clothes, he does. Lazarus had been raised from the dead! His funeral had been ruined, and a gathering of sorrow had been turned into a gathering of joy. The crowd is amazed. They have seen the power of Christ.

Lazarus doesn’t say much, though. In fact, we never hear a word from him here or anywhere else in the Gospels. The mere fact that he’s been raised from the dead, that everyone knew he had been dead and now wasn’t, was enough for his witness. In fact, in the same meetings where the Pharisee’s plot the death of Jesus, they plot the death of Lazarus, too, because his mere existence is proof that something strange has happened. As the saying goes, “Speak the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.” The words of Lazarus weren’t needed. His presence was evidence enough of who Jesus was and what He could do.

But we don’t hear from him about his experiences. We don’t hear from Lazarus whether he saw long-dead relatives or people with halos and wings. We don’t hear about angels or the great company of heaven. We just

see that Lazarus, who once was dead, is alive again because of Jesus. That’s enough.

Lazarus had been raised from the dead, but not for good. He would still die again. This funeral scene was not permanently removed, but was delayed. Death was still as much a part of the world as it is today. Grief and sorrow would come again to the house of Mary and Martha. Lazarus would one day again be wrapped in those grave clothes, placed in a tomb, and have a stone rolled in front of it. And this time there would be no voice shouting from outside the tomb.

But that wasn’t the end of the story. The story continued to another tomb that also had weeping women, a days-old body, and a stone to roll away. And that story also seemed like it had ended, on the cross. But this other tomb would not be used again. This other tomb would be an end, the end of the reign of death. The voice would not come from outside the tomb, but inside. “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!” (Luke 24:5-6).

Like Lazarus, we are dead in our tombs. Dead in tombs of our own making, dead in our sin. Wrapped with grave clothes that we cannot get ourselves out of, in situations of sin that trap us behind stones we could never move on our own. But Jesus calls us out of our sin, calls us out of our tombs, and rolls the stone away. Like Lazarus, Jesus has called us out of our tombs, out of death, into new life.

Famous artist Vincent Van Gogh had been in a mental asylum for over a year. His brother, Theo, sent him a letter and with the letter Theo included a copy of an etching by Rembrandt. The picture was Rembrandt’s fifth etching of

“The Raising of Lazarus.” In it, Jesus stands as a ruling figure, towering, powerful, looking out over the scene unfolding before him. At his feet, Lazarus is coming out of the tomb. No one looks at Jesus. All eyes are on Lazarus, as he rises from the grave. Yet Jesus stands there, the Resurrection and the Life. Here is the Resurrecting Christ. From him comes all power. The power over death and the power of life. In his rule, he raises Lazarus, opening the eyes of all people to see that he is the resurrection and the life.

When Van Gogh received this picture, he was inspired. He remembered the etching. In response, Van Gogh painted his own Raising of Lazarus. He focused in on the figure of Lazarus rising from the grave. Martha is pulling the veil from his eyes and Lazarus is only beginning to see the world again. If you look closely at the face of Lazarus, rising from the grave, you see that Van Gogh painted himself into Lazarus. There he is, a thin pale man with a red beard, rising from the grave. Not yet able to see all that God has done for him, not yet able to see Jesus ruling over all, only beginning to live, to taste the wonder of the Resurrecting Christ in his flesh in this world.

We, too, can see ourselves in the story of Lazarus. We, too, are not yet able to see all that God has done for us, we are not yet able to see Jesus ruling over all. But Christ has come into the world, into our lives. Christ has called us out of our tombs. And that gives us hope.

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