

## Unplanned Death

John 11

In the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indiana Jones (played by Harrison Ford) and his father (played by Sean Connery) are searching for the Holy Grail—the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper. Toward the end of the movie, as his father is dying from a gunshot wound, Indiana’s search for the Holy Grail takes on new intensity. Why is that? Because the Holy Grail is said to bring healing to those who drink from its cup. Indiana follows a book that guides him through a maze of obstacles so he can finally reach the Holy Grail.

Indiana comes to the edge of a canyon—deep and wide—and he’s faced with the impossible. As he studies his book, he realizes that it calls for a step of faith. His father whispers, “You must believe, boy, you must believe.” Indiana looks straight ahead, gathers his courage, and slowly raises one foot into the empty air in front of him.

With a thud, his foot lands on solid ground. The camera shows him standing on a narrow rock bridge. Overcome with relief, he crosses the canyon and discovers the Holy Grail. He chooses wisely, and is able to save his father. Sooner or later, we will all face a canyon—deep and wide. And that canyon is called death. And cross it we must. But how? Certainly not by our own efforts! Jesus shows us how. Jesus shows us that only through our Baptism into His suffering and death can we safely cross the canyon called death. In John 11, we come to the greatest sign of all—raising Lazarus from the dead.

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,

four days later, 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. That canyon of death, deep and wide, couldn’t be crossed. 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 answers. 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 a canyon no one could cross, not even Jesus. She may have hoped for healing if he came earlier, but no one could fix death.

Although we didn't hear that part of the lesson in the reading earlier, Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus 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. No one could cross that canyon.

Mary's weeping causes Jesus to weep as well. "Jesus wept" is the shortest verse in most English translations of the Bible. In two short words, we see how Jesus experienced the same thing we do. Through the Gospel of John, Jesus often seems to be larger than life, always in control. Yet here we see Jesus weeping, Jesus grieving, over the death of his friend Lazarus and the sadness that Mary and Martha and others are feeling.

Jesus weeps even though he knows what's going to happen. Jesus weeps even though he knows he is going to call Lazarus out of the tomb. Jesus weeps even though he knows that a somber funeral feast will become a celebration of restored life.

But Jesus doesn't stay in his grief. He is the resurrection and the life. He moves away from his grief to doing what he came to do. 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. Say this with me. "The dead man came out." Again, a little slower this time. "The dead man came out." I know, you think I'm crazy, but I want you to get the point. The dead man came out! This is the hinge point in John's Gospel. A chink has been found in death's armor. Death has been stripped of its power. Jesus confronts death. Life confronts death. And guess what? Life wins. Death dies and life wins!

As much as Lazarus is the reason for the story, he's not the focus. Jesus is. John keeps our eyes on Jesus as the resurrection and the life. That's the meaning we find. We know that death does not have the final word. We know that death, however it comes, cannot separate from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Christ's resurrection is the key to our own present hope and future glory. He had caused Lazarus to cross the canyon, from death to life.

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. There would be no one crossing that canyon again.

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.

Indiana Jones came to the edge of a canyon—deep and wide. So will we. Only our canyon is called death. How can we cross it? Take a step in faith toward Jesus. Jesus, who died for you. Jesus, who bled for you. Jesus, who forgives you. And Jesus, who loves you. Then Jesus will speak to you, straight from His heart. What will He say? Jesus will say to you, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

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