

5. Lazarus' Story

Introduction - Before listening to this story please press 'pause' and read John 11.38-44 then the story will last a little over 10 minutes and will be followed by a short reflection and a prayer.

It makes no sense. There he is, the friend who brought me back from the dead only a few weeks ago, dying on a cross! How can this be? I heard some of the Chief Priests talking amongst themselves as the soldiers went about their work, proud that they had engineered my friend's execution, *'He saved others; he cannot save himself'* one of them said triumphantly. I can't fault their logic, he saved me, why doesn't he save himself?

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We had been friends for a long time, me, my sisters, Mary and Martha, and Jesus. Sometimes he would come and eat with us. We never knew when he was coming, he would just turn up. Mary and I loved that, but it used to annoy Martha, she liked to be prepared for visitors. When he arrived unexpectedly she would rush around tidying up and preparing food. He used to tell her to calm down. Once when she was frantically trying to prepare a meal for us he pointed out that the birds don't fuss about preparing food and God feeds them I thought Martha was going to hit him! Of course she loved him like we did, she would have just liked him to give a little more notice before his visits.

Growing up I had never been particularly healthy. Our parents died when we were quite young and the three of us ended up staying together. With no parents to arrange marriages for us we simply started looking after each other. To be honest it was more Martha and Mary looking after me actually, to be totally honest, it was mainly Martha looking after me. Mary would sit chatting with me for hours when I was ill in bed, but it was Martha who brought me food and water.

The one thing we never talked about with each other, or with Jesus, was death. I don't know whether it was because of the untimely deaths of our parents or my poor health, but we just didn't want to think or talk about death at all. Speaking for myself, I was simply frightened. I had that ridiculous idea that to even



talk about death was to risk death coming to call. With the warped logic of superstition, I thought that if I didn't talk or think about death, it wouldn't notice me!

I only have vague, dreamlike memories of dying (for they tell me, I was really dead). I remember becoming more and more tired, unable even to lift my head from my bed to drink or eat. I remember Martha fussing, trying to make me comfortable and I remember Mary talking for hours, mainly gossip about the people in our village. I remember my world shrinking from our house, to my room, to my bed, and, when it was too hard to even open my eyes, my world became what happened in my painful, blurred and confused head. I can remember a sense of falling away, falling away from my sisters, falling away from reality into light, I suppose. I don't recall whether I simply didn't have the energy to be frightened or if fear just faded in the face of what seemed unavoidable. I lost track of time and surrendered to the inevitable. The next weird memory I have is of hearing a voice, in the distance, I heard my name and then the voice was calling me, *'Lazarus, come out'* I remember being a little annoyed. I wasn't sure where I was but I also was not all that sure that I wanted to leave wherever I was. But, years of responding to Martha's instructions made me obedient, so I got up and stumbled towards the voice.

I now know that the voice belonged to Jesus and he was calling me out of the grave. I have vague recollections of cold, a bad smell and of being tangled in material which made it difficult to walk. I stumbled and fell into his arms and he led me out towards the light of day.

My next clear memory is of sitting with Martha and Mary and Jesus and a few others sharing a meal a few days later. It felt good to be back to normal, though I wasn't at all sure what 'normal' was any more. We chatted and joked as we always did, particularly when Jesus was there, and then, at the end of the meal, Mary brought some perfume to the table, and without asking permission or giving any explanation, she began to anoint Jesus' feet. We sat in stunned silence and watched. As she massaged the sweet smelling oils into Jesus' feet she wiped the excess oil off with her long hair. I was both moved and shocked at the same time. Mary was doing something very intimate for Jesus which broke the customs and religious laws of our day, but Jesus did not stop her. He accepted her offering graciously and said, with his usual gentle smile, that she was preparing him for his burial. If he had said that a week earlier, before I had died, I would have been uncomfortable and fearful that such talk was inviting death to come, but now I felt



different, the fear had gone but the sadness remained – I did not understand what Jesus said but I didn't like to think of the world without him.

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Now. Standing on this hillside, watching life seep from the body of Jesus as he hangs on a cross, Mary's tender anointing begins to make some sense, though I don't know how she knew his life was heading towards execution. Maybe she saw that his gift of life to me would be just another reason the authorities would want to silence him? But I still can't figure out the answer to the question about why he isn't saving himself when he had saved me.

There has been another nagging question at the back of my mind ever since he called me out of the grave which is, why? why had he given me my life back? What was my new life for? Now that Jesus was going to die all that had happened felt all the more pointless. Was I raised from the dead simply to make Jesus look good? Was it so that he could rile the authorities even more? Was it simply a blatant show of power? Or, was it about me, Lazarus? Was Jesus simply giving his friend another chance at life? Or, maybe he was so moved by the grief of Mary and Martha that he gave me life again to comfort them? I did not know the answer to any of these questions and the fact that he was dying on a cross before my very eyes made the likelihood of there being any answers even more unlikely.

As the afternoon wore on and the signs of life in Jesus became harder to see I decided that all I could do was to accept what had happened at face value. I had received a gift from a friend and that gift was life. The fact that he was dying now was beyond my control and did not diminish the gift I had received so I should accept the gift with thanks and use it well. As I thought things through on that bleak afternoon I realised that the gift I had received was twofold, I had been given life, but I had also been given life without the fear of death. It struck me that if all this had happened to Jesus before I had died I would never be standing on this hillside – I would never have been able to look death in the face as I was doing now. Then it dawned on me – Jesus loved life, he loved being with his friends and sharing food and telling stories. Life was good and it was particularly good when he was around. What he did for me, calling me out of the tomb, and perhaps what was happening to him now, might mean that he is also my friend in death. Maybe all this is about him teaching me that death is not the big dark 'full stop' many fear it is – maybe the love he shared with me and my sisters in his friendship is bigger and more powerful than death?



I slowly walked across the valley from my vantage point at a safe distance and walked towards his cross – towards his dying. I felt no fear, only sadness. The cross was not very high and so I knelt down. I touched the tears on my cheek and then gently touched his feet, the feet my sister had anointed only a few days before. He roused and for a moment our eyes met and there was a connection, a moment of recognition and I knew that what was happening here was not the end of anything. The friendship we shared was not diminished in any way by what was happening, death changes everything, except love. I also began to feel that death was a beginning. I was not sure what was beginning but I knew that the life he had given me had to be seized and lived well, it had to be full of love, love for my sisters, my friends and, as he taught, also my enemies.

After he had died I found Mary and Martha who were nearby. Apparently when I had died they were distraught, hysterical. I was surprised to find them calm. They were sad and they were weeping, but we hugged and smiled and turned to walk back to Bethany and our home in silence.

When Jesus led me out of the tomb into the daylight I was confused and muddled but remember feeling a sense of expectancy and excitement - as we walked home on that sad Friday afternoon I sensed the echoes of those same feelings of expectancy and excitement. What for? I didn't know. All I knew was that the bond of love Mary, Martha and I shared with Jesus was as strong as ever.

Short pause

Reflection As Lazarus surveyed the wondrous cross, perhaps he was faced with hard questions and challenges? Why did Jesus not save his own life? What was Lazarus to do with his life now? Was death something to be feared? As we reflect on this story we pray for all who are dying or are consumed with grief. St Paul tells us that love never ends – may we all live and die in the light of this truth.

Prayer O God, your Son Jesus Christ wept over Lazarus his friend, and heard the anguished cries of Jairus for his daughter; hear those whose lives have been marked by tragedy and whose hearts ache with grief. Console those whose world has been shattered and whom no words can console. Comfort them in their darkest hour with the assurance that nothing can separate us from your love. Raise the dead to new life that all may again sing songs of thankfulness and praise, to your honour and glory. Amen