

258 Lazarus' New Life

(Note: This blog entry is based on the text "Lazarus' New Life", originally shared on March 22, 2023. It was the 258th video for our YouTube Channel, Streams of Living Water (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCB7KnYS1bPHKaL2OseQWCnw>), co-produced with my wife, Rev. Sally Welch.)

Who killed Jesus? Was it the Jews, or the Romans, or our sinful selves? Or maybe none of the above. Who then? We get a solid, if unexpected, answer in **John 11:1-45**. Today, we're going to find out what it is.

It's been raining in Southern California. It's been snowing in the mountains. Again. It rained so hard a few minutes ago that the rain gutters overflowed. They weren't blocked. The rain came down so hard that they couldn't handle the volume. And then it stopped.

Isn't that how it goes sometimes? The worst of the storm is right at its end. I suppose that's how Mary and Martha might have felt.

The siblings Lazarus, Mary, and Martha were among Jesus' closest friends. The family lived in the village of Bethany, just over the Mount of Olives and about two miles east of Jerusalem. It appears to have been Jesus' favorite place on earth. These were his close friends who were not among his close disciples. We have no record of him teaching publicly there. He just went there to relax and hang out with people who loved him and whom he loved.

One day, Lazarus was very sick and the sisters sent a message to Jesus to let him know.

Jesus said to his disciples, in **John 11:4b**,

^{4b}"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."

Phase One: "Oh, he's just sick." Lazarus is sick, but Jesus starts by doing nothing. Though he loves Lazarus and Mary and Martha, he stays put for two days. There's some kind of plan. What's going on? Then this happens in **verse 7**,

⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."

Which, the disciples say, is kind of crazy since he was just there and some of the people were trying to kill him.

Jesus brushes-off their concern and explains that they just don't understand who he is.

He describes Lazarus' situation in Phase Two: "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him."

What?! The disciples want to know why Jesus is going to risk his life, and maybe theirs, to wake Lazarus up from a nap. This makes no sense to them.

Phase 3: Jesus explains the situation, in **verse 14**,

¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead."

Jesus is then ready to go.

[Sidebar: What do you think of when you think of the disciple named Thomas? Doubting Thomas, right? Look at his behavior here, in **verse 16**,

¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Bold, huh? Thomas is a stand-up guy!]

The story continues with **verse 17**,

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.

People were already coming to console Mary and Martha. Martha hears that Jesus is coming and goes to meet him and says, in **verse 21b**,

^{21b} "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

That had to hurt, even as Martha speaks to Jesus with humility and faith.

Then comes the central message of this passage, in **verses 23-27**,

²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Martha goes and tells Mary that Jesus is near and is calling for her. Mary finds Jesus, kneels, and greets him with the same stinging words as her sister, in **verse 32b**,

^{32b} "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Now, I'm not normally much of a crier. Maybe more so now that I'm older and the estrogen is kicking in. But the floodgates open up if I see other people crying. That's it.

I remember sitting in the front row at my mother's funeral. She had died of complications of breast cancer at age 53. I was trying to keep it together. That's kind of the Norwegian way. Stoic. And I did it until I looked to my left and saw one of my best friends since childhood sitting with his wife, looking at me. And he looked stricken, and his face was pale and wet. That was it for me.

That's why I've usually looked over the heads of people at the funerals I have led. I need to stay focused on the needs of others, not my own.

I don't know if Jesus cried often. He lamented over Jerusalem. He was fully God, **and** he was fully human. Look what happens here, in **verses 33-35**,

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵Jesus began to weep.

There is it. John 11:35, "Jesus began to weep." In some translations it's, "Jesus wept.", the shortest verse in the Bible.

Do you ever picture Jesus crying? I don't. He seems to be above that kind of thing. He's God. Doesn't he see death all the time every day?

Why would Jesus weep over anything? He knows how it will turn out. Is death so unfamiliar to him? So unexpected?

Queen Elizabeth II once said, in a statement of condolence to the families of the British who were casualties on 9-11, "Grief is the price we pay for love."

Grief is the price we pay for love.

Was that it? Was it the expression of the living relationship with the one true living God for which we were all created and which now Jesus appears to have lost with Lazarus?

The next verse tells us, in **verse 36**,

³⁶So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

Others, though, were not so empathetic. Some questioned how Jesus healed the man born blind but didn't heal his friend, Lazarus. Jesus was again in grief and went to the cave-tomb. A stone was lying against it. Sound familiar?

Some protested when Jesus said, "Take away the stone", pointing out that after four days there would be a stench. The King James Version of the Bible translates this passage, "Lord, by this time he stinketh"! Much of Christian art of this event shows people holding their noses.

Jesus brushed all that off and says, in **verse 40b-41a**,

^{40b} "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"⁴¹ So they took away the stone.

Jesus prays with thanksgiving, and then this happens, in **verses 43-44**,

⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Wow! What an event! What must it have been like to be there at that moment? I wonder what the people who were there took away from this?

Well, we find out in the last verse of the passage, **verse 45**,

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

That's easy to understand. But what can we take away from this?

First, that there's a reason that the verses at the center of this event are so often heard at Christian funerals, **John 11:25-26**,

²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

It is the very foundation for our hope in the new life in this world and the new heaven and the new earth in the life to come in Jesus Christ.

Second, the answer to the question, "Who killed Jesus?"

The award-winning and Oscar-nominated film "The Fabelmans" is based on the life of director Steven Spielberg and contains a scene from when he was in high school being attacked for being a Jew, "because the Jews killed Jesus". The actor responds, in part, by saying that he wasn't around 2,000 years ago.

It is true that some Jews are shown calling for Jesus crucifixion, but not one of them is alive today. And I've always wondered why there isn't more anti-Italian prejudice directed at the descendants of the Romans who actually conducted the trial and did the crucifixion. "Jews" didn't kill Jesus any more than "Italians" did.

Others say that the answer to the question "Who killed Jesus?" is "You did." and "I did. Jesus died to be the only acceptable sacrifice for our sin, to restore the relationship with God that our sin had broken. He would not need to have been killed if it wasn't for the fact that humanity had messed things up.

But the fact is, and it is the record of scriptures, that, ultimately, nobody took Jesus' life. He gave it.

In **John 10:17-18**, where Jesus speaks about being the good shepherd and how the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, Jesus says,

17For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.

We see God's power over life and death in Jesus Christ in the raising of Lazarus from the dead. We see in the gift of God in Jesus Christ that Jesus **gives** his life on the cross as fully God and fully human being, and then he takes it up again in the Resurrection.

Third, that we have good news to share: that Jesus **is** the Resurrection and the life. Our lives are transformed, they are made new, through a living relationship with the one true living God that we call "faith". Lazarus was raised from the dead **by** Jesus, but he is given new life, eternal life, **in** Jesus, and that is much more important.

Lazarus would die again, eventually. His **eternal** life is assured in Jesus. *"Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."* The question is "Do you believe this?"

A colleague, a predecessor at a congregation I served, told me about the night he had a Church Council meeting, and he knew it would be a late evening. He called his wife and told her not to make a dinner for him. He would just stop by MacDonald's on the way home, which he did. But, as he got out of his car to order inside, someone jumped out at him, pointed a gun at him and told him to give him all his money or he'd kill him.

He told me, "I wish I could say that I was brave, but the truth is that I was just tired, and I said, 'You can't kill me. I've already died in Jesus Christ.'"

All the color drained from the other person's face, and he turned and ran away!

That brings us to the **Fourth** lesson, that we have already died. We died in our baptism. Death is a past-tense experience for us. Does that mean we are the “Living Dead?”

In a sense, it does.

Paul writes, in **Romans 6:3-5**,

3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

And, **Fifth**, that God suffers with us in our suffering.

Jesus wept. He was greatly distressed. He was “disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” That in itself is a sign to us pointing to the nature of God.

I remember very clearly when my father was dying. My brothers and sister and I were at the hospital. Our dad was in and out of consciousness. His organs were shutting down. We took turns sitting with our dad while the others sat in the hallway. I’ve been in that space countless times as the pastor. I’ve struggled with the right things to say in that moment.

I remember when the pastor from our hometown church, our dad’s pastor, came to visit. He didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to. The look on his face said everything. We so appreciated his visit, his empathy and his concern. He just had to be there to express all of that.

People say weird things when people have died. Even Christians. Things like, “I guess God needed another angel”, or “Everything happens for a reason.” or “Don’t cry, they’re with the Lord now.” or “God won’t give you any more than you can handle.” None of these reach us at the point of our pain. But I don’t criticize people for saying them. People just don’t know what to say in their grief, in the face of death, and they’re afraid of saying the wrong thing.

The best we can do is to be present in the hallways of people’s hearts. To sit with them. To share their grief even in the midst of our hope.

This is what God does. God loves us at the point of our pain. God weeps at the point of our loss and reminds us of His eternal promises **in** our suffering: love everlasting.

We have no need to fear death. It's just a transition to another way of living. But we feel that pain in the pain of others even as we rejoice in the promise of eternal life given to us by Jesus Christ on the cross.

The question is, do you believe it? Do you believe that the key to life and death is Jesus Christ? That life is not something we achieve, but something we receive as the gift of God in Jesus Christ?

That he gave his life and then took it back again. That Jesus has set everyone who believes and is baptized free from the effects of sin, death and the power of the devil?

Share the good news.

Jesus has unbound us, and let us go!