

THE RESURRECTION OF LAZARUS or *Mr STINKY is FREE for LIFE*

The recent series of natural disasters are a reminder - if we needed reminding, that life is capricious and transitory. These times force us to face our mortality yet modern culture tends to avoid the subject of death altogether. With evolution as the prevailing worldview you'd expect death to be accepted as part of the natural cycle of organic life. So why do we have an innate revulsion and horror at death? Why do we 'rage against the night'? The answer is God. The Bible says that death is not natural to human beings for we were created by God to be immortal. *Ecc 3:11* 'God has ... set eternity in the hearts of men...'

The Good News is God's Son came to free for life. *Jn 20:30* Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. John described 7 such miraculous signs, the 7th and most spectacular being the resurrection of Lazarus.

Jn 11:1 Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." ⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." ⁵ Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.

Jesus had a close friendship with Lazarus and his sisters: Martha, the hyperactive organizer who was chastised by the Lord for being too busy to listen to him; and Mary who, in chap. 12, will anoint the Lord's feet with perfume, sadly wiping his feet with her hair as if in preparing for his burial. Death is never far from Jesus waiting an opportunity to strike.

Given their closeness it must have seemed odd indeed when Jesus was so unconcerned at news of his friend's condition: This sickness will not end in death he says. He makes no effort to go to pray for his healing. His motives are quite puzzling for how is he to be glorified if he is not present when Lazarus recovers? ⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." ⁸ "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?"

Why risk going back so near to where the Jews had tried to stone him? And they had good reason to be outraged - Jesus had said. ^{10:30} I and the Father are one." ³¹ Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, ³² but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?" ³³ "We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God."

In spite of the threat the Lord is resolute he will not miss an opportunity to fulfill God's purpose in sending him to bring freedom and life. The Lord uses sleep to refer to Lazarus's temporary death, which Christians later copied - cemetery is a Christian term meaning place of sleep. ¹² His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." ¹³ Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. ¹⁴ So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

Sleep has the expectation of being alive and becoming awake, but if Lazarus is already dead, what's the point in putting themselves in danger? ¹⁶ Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Thomas's reply is seen as faithful courage but I reckon it's more fateful resignation: *"Sure let's go and be with Lazarus, ie we'll be dead too!"*

They arrive in Bethany 4 days after the funeral. Martha goes to meet him. ²¹ "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." What does she mean?

In v.21 Martha may be rebuking Jesus for of his dawdling but probably she is speaking out of grief and sadness reaching out to the Lord for help. In v.22 she may be expecting Jesus to ask God to comfort her bereaved sister and herself; or she may hope that Jesus can still help her dead brother. Had she seen Jesus raise the dead before as reported in M, M & L – although none had been buried? Is she asking Jesus to do something similar for Lazarus? Maybe, but her repulsion at the expected smell at the tomb makes her motive uncertain.

Whatever, the Lord offers her the comfort of the hope of a future resurrection.

²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴ Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” The OT prophets had foretold that at the end of history there would be a new creation of a new heavens and a new earth and the dead would rise to new life. She knows that ultimately Lazarus & herself with all God’s people will rise. It’s not that Jesus offers a cold comfort. It was just so very theoretical to her – the far off Last Day. What about now?

²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Wow! Incredible! *I am* the resurrection and the life is the 5th of 7 I Am sayings by Jesus in which he identifies himself with the personal name of God *Yahweh* meaning I Am in Hebrew. *the* resurrection and *the* life refers to the whole experience of the last day of history and the new creation. In effect Jesus says he is the divine fulfillment of human history: he is freedom from death & eternal life with God.

But wait there’s more!! He says that our destiny, our existence beyond death depends totally on him. How we respond to Jesus now will determine where we spend eternity. If we believe in Jesus, then we will not actually experience death even when we die. As this body ceases to function, we will immediately experience eternal life not death. What else can be said but ...

Do you believe this?" ²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." The disciples' understanding of Jesus' identity begins with believing him to be a small 's' son of God: a holy prophet with a divine anointing in close relationship with God. Progressively their appreciation grows as Jesus gradually reveals his person in word & deed.

Martha doesn't yet have the full understanding of Jesus as God the Son, 2nd person of the Trinity but she's close. It will only be in the presence of the Risen Christ, that Thomas will finally declare, 'My Lord and my God'. Martha's understanding may not be fully formed yet her faith in Christ is true enough.

The story continues with Martha calling Mary who responds to Jesus with a similar *Lord if only...* How many 'Lord if only' prayers have you prayed? - as many as me probably. Now the next few verses give us an astonishing insight into the character of God. ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. ³⁵ Jesus wept.

Jesus will say to Phillip, If you have seen me you have seen the Father: the Son reveals the Father's heart. There is an ancient and universal view of the eternal God as distant and impassable – that is, he cannot be moved by emotion. But ... Jesus wept! (pause) God *knows* how you feel. That's why our *Lord, If only* prayers are not only heard but felt in the very heart of the Godhead. Jesus wept.

Some cynics said, not unreasonably, that while loving compassion over his friend's death was laudable, actually healing Lazarus before he died would have been more helpful. Jesus promises a lot but can he deliver? ³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

The wonderfully olfactory translation of the KJV says, Martha saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh. The sensory reality of the scene is vivid in sight, sound and smell. ⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.” Believing God sent Jesus is the way to eternity. God does help us in our temporal strife & struggles, but he is always more concerned that we enter into his eternal hope.

⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” Mr. Stinky is set free for life— this is God’s purpose for each and every one of us. Many who witnessed the scene put their faith in Jesus but the religious authorities were galvanized by the threat to their power to be finally rid of him and Lazarus. Their actions, irony of ironies, resulted in the immortal resurrection of Christ.

As wonderful as the resurrection of Lazarus was it was only temporal. That day Lazarus returned with a mortal body only to return to his grave and mortal corruption once more. Lazarus had been set free for life but he must wait, as must we all, for our own immortal resurrection on the last day when Jesus’ promise to Martha I am the resurrection and the life will be realized for eternity.

Life can be pretty difficult at times and sometimes we may hold back putting our complete trust in God but God really does care for us and knows how we feel. More than that God has sent Jesus to give us a sure and certain hope. So, I appeal to you to trust in Jesus as Martha. May we all be able to answer the Lord’s challenge, Do you believe this?” as she did: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.” Amen.