

John 62 –The Resurrection of Lazarus

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Scripture 1: (Jn. 11:28-46 ESV)

When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him.

Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, "Where have you laid him?"

They said to him, "Lord, come and see."

Jesus wept.

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

But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone."

Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days."

Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me."

When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out."

The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

Sermon:

Three friends of Jesus, living in Bethany, called and asked Him to come because one of them, Lazarus, was sick unto death. Lazarus' sisters asked Jesus to come because they believed in Jesus and they hoped that He would help their brother (11:21, 32). But Jesus, for His own reasons, delayed coming and Lazarus died. Now, four days later, Jesus has finally arrived in Bethany, coming instead to comfort the sisters and be present with them in their grief over the loss of their brother rather than to heal him.

After first welcoming and then confronting Jesus, Martha *"...called her sister Mary, saying in private, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him."* Martha must have decided that since they were some place safe enough for Jesus, she could now call for her younger sister, to come attend to their friend and mentor/teacher.

"Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there." Jesus had not yet entered the town. He was still outside and away. However, when Mary left, the Jews who were with her assumed that she was leaving to go to her brother's tomb. They did not know that Jesus was nearby and they were unconcerned about the potential for His appearance. Perhaps and probably, if this group of "Jews" belonged to the sect of Pharisees or were, at least, sympathetic to their theological views and convictions then, they may have also been sympathetic to the sisters' views concerning Jesus. These Jews might even have been friendly and positively inclined towards Jesus or, minimally, unopposed to Him and His teachings. This is just my supposition about possibilities, since the text does not make it clear, but, I think it is a fairly reasonable interpretation and assumption.

Nevertheless, they followed Mary because they were unwilling to leave her to suffer in her grief alone. While it may not seem like such a "big deal" to us, we might be more inclined to give her space, going to the tomb with Mary was evidence for the depth of feeling that they felt because it was a costly spiritual sacrifice to go with her. The Law declared that, *"Whoever touches the dead body of any person shall be unclean seven days. He shall cleanse himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, and so be clean. But if he does not cleanse himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not become clean. Whoever touches a dead person, the body of anyone who has died, and does not cleanse himself, defiles the tabernacle of the LORD, and that person shall be cut off from Israel; because the water for impurity was not thrown on him, he shall be unclean. His uncleanness is still on him."* (Num. 19:11-13 ESV). Lazarus had already been dead for four days and since he surely died at home, suffering from some undisclosed illness, the sisters would be considered "unclean", especially since they must have prepared their brother for burial; even if they did not, they still would have been unclean because *"This is the law when someone dies in a tent: everyone who comes into the tent and everyone who is in the tent shall be unclean seven days."* (Num. 19:14 ESV). Since Lazarus had been dead and sealed in the tomb for four days, Martha and Mary would have just completed the first stage of their required ritual cleansing. Going to the tomb would risk a repeat contamination, and contamination for their fellow mourners, because they were risking contact with other dead bodies or other unclean things. But these mourners were willing to sacrifice their ritual purity (something exceptionally important to people having Pharisaical values) for the sake of remaining "present" with Martha and Mary; for the sake of comforting them in their grief and sharing in their (temporary) exclusion from the Jerusalem Temple and Jewish life.

But, instead of going to the tomb, Mary went to where Jesus was, unintentionally leading the Jewish mourners to Him as well. Like her sister before her, Mary confronted Jesus, and accused Him of failing her brother Lazarus, *"Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'"* She accused Him with the confidence and surety of her faith. She accused Him with her disappointment and sorrow. She accused Him with her brokenness, blaming Jesus for her brother's death instead of accepting it as the LORD's providential will, as Martha seemed to. We

are certainly not the first to accuse or blame God for the loss of our loved one. So, “*When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.*”.

The story of Lazarus' death and resurrection in Bethany is a much beloved story and it is a source of comfort for our sorrowful souls. Not only does this story provide strong evidence for Jesus being the Son of God, not only does this story build up our hope in the resurrection, this story is also one of the strongest examples of Christ's humanity; demonstrating the depth of His emotions and the fullness of His ability to empathize with us. Seeing Mary's sorrow and the sadness of the Jews following her, Jesus “...*was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.*”. Jesus was unsettled in His soul. He was agitated because of his feelings. Jesus experienced strong emotions, running the full gamut from anger to sorrow in a very short and compressed time. Like us, Jesus also became upset and confused by the range and severity of His own expressed human emotions.

Truly, Jesus was like us in every way, “*yet without sin*” (Hebrews 4:15). Not only was He “tempted” like us: experiencing the world's same outward attractions meant to entice our desire to sin; but, He also felt the same emotions: responding to the different experiences of life. Jesus got happy and He got sad. Jesus felt pain and He felt pleasure. Jesus almost surely got sick, just as He got well. Jesus got angry and mad and He was satisfied. So, recognizing the truth of Jesus' humanity, appreciating the fullness of His humanity and the fullness of His deity, gives us the confidence to believe that Jesus actually understands us and that He can appreciate and empathize with whatever we are going through because, we know that He actually experienced it too. Understanding the humanity of Jesus Christ is important for us, as a matter of our faith, because His empathy is based of His human experience rather than as an intellectual-only, divine understanding. Jesus understands everything that we go through, therefore, He is willing and able to help us through whatever that may be.

Then Jesus asked the mourners, “*Where have you laid him?*” and they respectfully answered, “*Lord, come and see.*”. I would note that it is unclear who all is meant by the “they” who responded, whether the crowd of mourners or just the sisters. My opinion, based on the respectfulness implied by their use of “Lord”, is that it was merely Martha and Mary's response.

Then, “*Jesus wept.*”. While these two words comprise the shortest verse in the Bible {two words and one definite article in the Greek}, it is one of the most impactful depictions of Jesus for us to hear and understand as Christians. “*Jesus wept.*”, was a simple act, filled with an abundance of meaning. It was a simple act described by words that fail to express the intended fullness.

- Jesus wept, but He was not just upset.
- Jesus wept, but He did not simply sigh in sorrow.
- Jesus wept, but He did not shed a couple of tears.
- Jesus wept, but He did not merely cry and become red-eyed.
- Jesus wept.

“To weep” is not a verb we commonly use today. Instead we use one of many lesser synonyms¹, we: cry, sob, scream, grieve, bawl, blub, mourn, blubber, lament, whine, whimper, greet, groan, howl, moan, wail, sigh, squall, snuffle, keen, snivel, bleat, mewl, yowl, and pule; and each one describes a different kind of response to human sorrow. Every response is as valid and appropriate as any other but, “to weep” best encompasses them all. The Greek term used here is *dakruo*, and this is it's sole appearance in the entire Greek New Testament. But, it was used by those who translated the Old Testament to describe the sorrowful groanings of Job, when he

¹<https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/weep>

cursed the day of his birth (Job 3:24), and to describe the expression of the Mediterranean sea peoples in response to the LORD's judgment of Tyre (Ezekiel 27:35).

So, when the evangelist says that, “*Jesus wept.*”, he is saying that Jesus was feeling the whole range of human emotion and that Jesus was very obviously being effected by His feelings. Jesus was not an unfeeling Vulcan or stoic philosopher. Jesus was very much, fully human and fully God. “*Jesus wept.*” and his expression of emotion moved His fellow mourning Jews to exclaim, “*See how he loved him!*”.

- The weeping of Jesus was a public demonstration of Jesus's grief over Lazarus's death.
- The weeping of Jesus was a public demonstration of Jesus's grief over Lazarus's sin, which made dying necessary.
- The weeping of Jesus was a public demonstration of Jesus's grief over humanity's sin, which justly leads to every person's death (Hebrews 9:27).
- The weeping of Jesus was a public demonstration of Jesus's grief over the brokenness and corruption of the world caused by Adam's sin.
- The weeping of Jesus was ultimately an expression of God the Father's grief over what humanity has done to His good creation.

“*Jesus wept.*” Jesus was sorrowful over the death of Lazarus and Jesus grieved because of the death of His friend, even though Jesus knew what He was about to do. Even though He knew the Lazarus' death was only temporary, “*Jesus wept.*”. The fact that “*Jesus wept.*” should encourage us and remind us that it is OK for us to be sorrowful when our loved ones die. It is OK for us to grieve over such felt losses, even as Christians; even as Christians who believe that Jesus Christ will raise the dead, restore us to true wholeness, and cause us to become holy and be justified as righteous before our Father's throne.

It is OK for us to grieve when someone dies. It is natural for us to grieve when we are confronted by death. It is part of human nature to grieve death, because God grieves death. We grieve at death because death is an unnatural thing, the just and rightful consequence of sin; the product of sin, which God did not create and is not responsible for. It is OK for us to grieve death because our grief and sorrow is tempered by the hope-filled knowledge that one day, even death itself shall die and be no more (Revelation 20:14). “*Jesus wept.*”, Jesus grieved His friend's death, and then God the Son did something about it.

Meanwhile, some of the mourners who witnessed Jesus weep, scornfully and cynically questioned among themselves, “*Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?*”. Their hearts remained stoney, hard, and dead in their sin. They doubted Jesus. They doubted His power and they doubted His Word. Their cold hearts could only conceive of “preservation”, a continuing maintenance of the status quo.

They lacked the imagination and hope that only the Holy Spirit gives. They could not imagine the “restoration” that Jesus offers. They could not imagine things actually getting better, at least, maybe not better than they were back in the days of Solomon. They could not imagine life being restored to the dead. They could not imagine true healing or true wholeness. They could not imagine a world without sin or its effects. They could not imagine a New Heaven, a New Earth, or life in the world to come. They could not imagine it, therefore, Jesus needed to show it to them, once again.

“*Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it.*”, 1st Century Jewish burials in Israel were very different from how we lay our loved ones to rest, today. Their funerary practice consisted of anointing the body with certain herbs, spices, oils, or unguents and then wrapping them in binding clothes. But, this was not to preserve the body; this was not a form of Jewish embalming to create

mummies like the ancient Egyptians. Rather, the herbs helped aid in the body's decomposition, while the cloth bindings kept their bones gathered. The hands and feet were tightly bound because of their many small bones. Then, the body would be closed inside a stone tomb, set out upon either a stone bench or within an alcove. These tombs were naturally formed caves or hewn from the stone for this purpose, and although they were sealed by a heavy stone rolled across the opening, they were not intended to be airtight, just tight enough to prevent the invasion of animals or scavengers. Then, about a year later, after the flesh had decomposed, the tomb would be reopened and the bones would be collected and sealed within a stone box called an "ossuary". This box was their final repository and would be stored elsewhere within the tomb, alongside the remains of other family members.

It is important for us to understand these particulars from the historical and cultural context because that context demonstrates the improbability of the sister's involvement in any conspiracy of fraud, since they could not move the stone on their own. This knowledge supports the improbability of someone being willing or able to remain within a tomb for four days, pretending to be dead, because of it being such a cramped, enclosed and dark space. Together, this firmly emphasizes the simple fact that Lazarus was truly dead.

Then, Jesus commanded them, *"Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days."'* 1st Century Jews were exceptionally conscientious people. They feared inadvertently causing offense and the smell of a four-day decomposing body, even in winter, should not smell pleasant. However, the Jews were even more concerned about preserving their ritual purity, something that the smell of decay and death would have offended against, just as contact with a dead body would transmit its "uncleanness" to the living. So, despite their other faults, the ancient Jews understood, better than most others, that death is the most unnatural thing in the world.

Now, I hate it when people say things like, "Death is a natural part of life.". That is one of the biggest lies that people choose to believe. Christians should never say it because Christians do not believe it. Although every person will die, death is not natural. Death is not a part of life. Death is unnatural. Death is horrible and inglorious. Death is the necessary consequence of sin (Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23). It is because of Adam's sin and on account of our own sins that *"...it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment..."* (Heb. 9:27 ESV). But, just as death is not something we celebrate or affirm, we also should not fear it because of our resurrection hope; because we know that our physical death is not the end, but only the closing of a chapter, as Paul said, *"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."* (Phil. 1:21 ESV).

Thus Jesus responded to Martha, *"Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"*.

- Lazarus's resurrection would be a display of the glory and power of God, affirming what Jesus had told His disciples earlier, that, *"This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."* (Jn. 11:4 ESV).
- Lazarus's resurrection would be confirmation that Jesus is the Son of Man and God the Son, proving His earlier public claim, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when **the dead** will hear the voice of the Son of God, and **those who hear will live**. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man."* (Jn. 5:25-27 ESV)

Then, *"they took away the stone."* At Jesus' command, the grave of Lazarus was opened and the prophesy of Ezekiel 37:12 began to be fulfilled. Jesus *"...cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out."'* and *"The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth."*

Unlike the few resurrections recorded in the Old Testament, those involving: Elijah and the widow's son in Zarephath (1 Kings 17:17-24, Elisha and the Shunammite woman's son (2 Kings 4:8-37), and the dead man who

was cast into Elisha's grave (2 Kings 13:20-21); the resurrection of Lazarus was less “showey”, but no less dramatic.

- Elijah cried out with loud prayers before the child he raised, returned to life.
- Elisha performed an elaborate ritual before the child he raised, returned to life.
- But the last man, who was unceremoniously dumped into the grave of Elisha, was restored to life without any fanfare when his body touched the prophet's bones.

But Jesus simply spoke. Jesus spoke a word of command and dead Lazarus obeyed. The Son of God spoke a word of life and the dead listened and obeyed.

After witnessing this amazing occurrence, “*Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.*”. Some believed and some did not. Some believed in Jesus, but others continued to doubt and deny. Ezekiel's prophesy was fulfilled, “*And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves...*” (Ezek. 37:13 ESV); therefore, whether or not they believed it, they knew it and they were without excuse.

One final note about the text, John mentioning that some of these Jews “...*went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.*” does not refute or contradict the interpretation that Lazarus, Martha, Mary, and many of the mourners were also Pharisees. Instead, it was just a more refined use, since the way John ordinarily uses “Pharisees” is in regards to their leaders, their public and prominent {federal} representatives, rather than the whole of the sect's membership.

The resurrection of Lazarus is the seventh miraculous Sign offered by John, demonstrating that Jesus is the Son of God. This story also included the fifth occasion of Jesus declaring “I AM”: claiming equality with the LORD, God the Father; when He told Martha, “*I am the resurrection and the life.*”. The grief expressed by Jesus, the depth of His emotion and sorrow, on account of Lazarus's death fully demonstrated the truth and reality of Jesus's humanity. Together, the evangelist presents all of these evidences to support that Jesus is God the Son: the *Logos* who is *Theos* and *Andros*; and they work together to encourage our hope in God's promise of new life in Him and in a future resurrection from the dead to live in His Kingdom, forever.

So, apart from being evidence to support our belief that Jesus is both God and man and, apart from encouraging us by the knowledge of His ability to truly empathize with our human weaknesses and frailties and, apart from building up hope within us that Jesus is able to raise us from the dead and, apart from being a prophetic fulfillment to confirm an even greater promise of God [that all of the dead shall be raised, that all shall be judged, and that some shall be raised to an eternal life of blessing while others are raised to an eternal life of judgment and condemnation(John 5:25-28)] how should Christians respond to the death and resurrection of Lazarus? How does this story directly impact our lives?

I am sad to say that, in most respects, I do not think it really does. We did not witness it. We only know about it on the ump-teenth hand, yet we believe that the story is both factual and true. I doubt that this story, that this evidence, was the final puzzle piece which convinced many of us about “Who Jesus is” and “What Jesus has done for us”. Remember the final teaching in the story about that “other Lazarus” (Luke 16:20-31), when Abraham tells him “*If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.*” (Lk. 16:31 ESV). It is a great piece of evidence that supports our conviction and hope in God's promises, yet the story of Lazarus does not really directly effect our lives.

But, while the story of Lazarus may not directly impact us, it still has a tremendous impact on our faith. Believing that Lazarus was raised from the dead (small miracle), helps us to believe that Christ is raised from

the dead (big miracle), so that we may hope for the fulfillment of all God's promises when, since we know that He can and since we trust that He will, when He will raise us all from the dead (biggest miracle). It helps us to believe that when we are raised from the dead, we will stand before the throne of God and we will be judged: the Elect will be declared righteous (Romans 4:5, 5:19) because they have been washed in the blood of Christ (Revelation 7:14), and because their names are written in the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 21:27). We will each be rewarded according to our deeds (Matthew 6:20; 1 Corinthians 3:14-15), more or less according to the good (or evil) that we have done, and then we shall each enter into our final destination.

So, believing this, believing because of these resurrection proofs, will impact how we live our lives. It will effect our sense of assurance and our peace with Christ. It will effect how we grow in grace. It will effect the degree of urgency and importance we feel towards the work of evangelism, proclaiming and sharing the truth of Jesus Christ with others. It will effect the degree of importance and direct our efforts for doing good works of charity and love, in the name of Christ, as our response of faith rather than as for a hope for our salvation. The Apostle Paul told the church in Corinth and he tells us, about the importance of the fact of these resurrections and of the hope we have because of them. *“Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”* (1 Cor. 15:12-26 ESV)

Our entire hope, as Christians, the truth of everything that we believe about “Who Jesus is” and “What Jesus has done” and “What Jesus is doing for us” depends entirely upon the truth of, the fact of the resurrection. So, if the truth of Lazarus's resurrection and if the truth of Jesus's resurrection does not effect and impact your life in those ways, as a Christian, then you are without hope and one deserving of pity. But, if the resurrection does effect your life, then believe Christ and trust in His promises. Then know and believe that you will be raised and that you will be judged as righteous, because of your faith in Jesus Christ. Then know and believe that by Jesus's life, death, and resurrection and through your faith in Him, your sins are forgiven.

AMEN