

# John 11:1-45

## The Death of Lazarus

<sup>1</sup> Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup> Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup> So the sisters sent a message to Jesus,<sup>[a]</sup> “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” <sup>4</sup> But when Jesus heard it, he said, “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.” <sup>5</sup> Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, <sup>6</sup> after having heard that Lazarus<sup>[b]</sup> was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

<sup>7</sup> Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” <sup>8</sup> The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” <sup>9</sup> Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. <sup>10</sup> But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” <sup>11</sup> After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” <sup>12</sup> The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” <sup>13</sup> Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. <sup>14</sup> Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. <sup>15</sup> For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” <sup>16</sup> Thomas, who was called the Twin,<sup>[c]</sup> said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

## Jesus the Resurrection and the Life

<sup>17</sup> When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus<sup>[d]</sup> had already been in the tomb four days. <sup>18</sup> Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles<sup>[e]</sup> away, <sup>19</sup> and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. <sup>20</sup> When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. <sup>21</sup> Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” <sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” <sup>24</sup> Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” <sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life.<sup>[f]</sup> Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” <sup>27</sup> She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah,<sup>[g]</sup> the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

## Jesus Weeps

<sup>28</sup> When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” <sup>29</sup> And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. <sup>30</sup> Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup> The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. <sup>32</sup> When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him,

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”<sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.<sup>34</sup> He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”<sup>35</sup> Jesus began to weep.<sup>36</sup> So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”<sup>37</sup> But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

### **Jesus Raises Lazarus to Life**

<sup>38</sup> Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.<sup>39</sup> Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.”<sup>40</sup> Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”<sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me.<sup>42</sup> I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.”<sup>43</sup> When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”<sup>44</sup> 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.”

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

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**John 11:1-45; Romans 8:6-11**

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“I feel sorry for Lazarus,” she said, “he had to die twice.” This statement really hit me, knowing it came from a woman who had buried two husbands.

I wonder about this story. Just like I wonder about last week’s story, the one that happens to be cross-referenced in this text. Jesus says in both instances – that the afflictions of others – whether it was the man’s blindness, or the death of his friend Lazarus happened so that the glory of God could be revealed in him. I’m not sure I like what that says to us. Are these miracles just meant to be part of the show? Do we need convincing that Jesus can do magical things – opening blind eyes and raising someone from the dead?

Setting aside my skepticism for a minute, maybe I can begin to understand why the raising of Lazarus is miraculous, and not just part of a show to convince us that Jesus is the Son of God. Life is a precious and a fragile thing. And when death comes, we weep for our loss, we are distraught, and we desperately want that person back in our lives - all the same feelings described perfectly in this text. I would love to be able to sit down with my grandfather again in person, but I can’t. I would love for him to know my children now because he was always so good around kids. I can imagine what he might say to me. I can even talk to him in the prayers of

my heart. But he isn't here. He isn't coming back – not like Lazarus anyway. And that hurts, less now than when it happened, but I miss his advice and I would love to see him smile for real, because he didn't much go in for having his picture taken.

I'm sure that Mary and Martha were having these same kinds of feelings about their brother. And for them it was still raw. Only four days from his death to when Jesus showed up. They had heard about how Jesus had healed the blind man. Hadn't everyone by now? If he had been around, he could have healed Lazarus too, but like I heard a studied scientist say, you can't heal a cut on a corpse. Once he was dead, then what else could they ask for or expect? It was over. What might have been possible a few days ago, was no longer possible. The tomb had been closed, not just now, but with enough time passing that they expected the stench of decay.

According to the movies, this never ends well. Reviving the dead belongs in the horror genre – not your usual feel-good movie. Martha could say with conviction that her brother was destined for resurrection on the last day, but that didn't mean she thought anything was going to happen today. I can't imagine what it meant to Mary and Martha to see their brother come out of that grave, let alone what it must have been like for Lazarus himself. The magic could easily give way to the macabre. Once the shock wore off, how much did it bother Lazarus to know that he was going to have to die? Again?

This could easily feel more like dream sequence than reality even though John tells it as genuine proof of Jesus' unique nature and abilities. Dead people don't come back to life, not like this. And it's strange that for such a surprising event, that the other three gospel writers fail to mention it. John, however, tells multiple stories of transformation, stories that later church liturgical committees put together in a Lenten series to help us see how Jesus touches peoples' lives, and they are radically different, renewed, and made whole. Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cover of night to hear about being born anew. The woman at the well draws living water. The man blind from birth opens his eyes and he can see. And Lazarus, Jesus' dear friend Lazarus, walks right out of his tomb.

These stories illustrate the power of God. They are meant to. But for me, it's not the magical nature of these stories that has the greatest effect. It's the connection that Jesus makes with real people about their real lives and real feelings. It's that Jesus cares about the religious bureaucrat who wants a deeper spiritual experience. It's that he cares about the woman from a different religious background and sketchy reputation that is willing to receive and retell a message of hope. It's that he cares about a blind man's sight, and seeing men's blindness. It's that he loves, deeply loves his friends, and wants them to know in a physical, visceral way that death is not the final reality. Eternal life, abundant life is the ultimate reality.

It is a vision. It is a hope. It is a dream that we dare to dream that Jesus can heal us in much the same ways by calming our fears and opening our spirits. He can bring the dead parts of us to life, and help us manage all those many little deaths that happen throughout a lifetime, to prepare us for when our time comes.

Much about death remains a mystery. Lazarus' chance to die not once, but twice may be something to feel sorry for, but it may also feel somewhat familiar. I am not who I was before. I'm not my 6 year old self, or my 16 year old self, or my 26 year old self, or even my 36 year old self. And the only reason I'm my 46 year old self is that's what the calendar tells me. I have died to much, and yet, I have so much to live for.

One of the scripture texts designated for this week in Lent is a favorite of mine for meditation for when thoughts like this come to mind. It is Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones, found in the 37<sup>th</sup> chapter of that prophet's work. I'd like to read it now, slowly, and with some pauses so you can imagine the dry bones, whatever they are for you today, and so that you can imagine those places in yourself that would benefit from God's breath blowing through and re-animating parts of your life. A long time ago, a rabbi taught me how to pray with this passage, and I am grateful to her for it.

# Meditation on Ezekiel 37

## The Valley of Dry Bones

37 The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. <sup>2</sup> He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. <sup>3</sup> He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” <sup>4</sup> Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. <sup>5</sup> Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath<sup>[a]</sup> to enter you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup> I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath<sup>[b]</sup> in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

<sup>7</sup> So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. <sup>8</sup> I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. <sup>9</sup> Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath:<sup>[c]</sup> Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath,<sup>[d]</sup> and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” <sup>10</sup> I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

<sup>11</sup> Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ <sup>12</sup> Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. <sup>13</sup> And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. <sup>14</sup> I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.”