

“Encounters with Jesus V”  
Lazarus, Come Out!

I am captivated by the scene described in John 11. Sometimes I imagine that I am a movie director, and try to decide how to depict this story. We see the sun-bleached dryness of the tomb in which Jesus’ dear friend lies dead, hear the muted sobs of the black-robed mourners, feel the pervasive sense of despair, the waiting—always when someone has died there is this sense of waiting—for God knows what.

There is no ambiguity here, in marked contrast to so many stories in John. After several weeks immersed in this gospel, we have grown used to the exasperating literary device of people talking past one another. And it looks as though there will be more of this when Jesus tells the disciples that Lazarus is sleeping and they take him literally and say, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” But Jesus then tells them plainly, “Lazarus is dead,” period. There are tears for the loss of Lazarus, tears for the indisputable reality that we all must die, tears for the fact that mourning is the evident end of us all: to mourn and, by the grace of God, to have a few friends at the end so that we too are mourned. Maybe that’s one reason we go to funerals. As Yogi Berra put it, “If you don’t go to other peoples’ funerals, they won’t go to yours.”

All our investments of self in love of this world and in love of other people; all of our investments of self in building and keeping and protecting things... all of this comes to a dusty end at the tomb. And the empty silence mocks our lives and loves with its unblinking insistence that nothingness is our end. What does it matter, any of it? All human striving comes to nothing, and at the end there will not even be anybody around to turn out the lights and chuckle at the irony. No, there is no ambiguity here. Lazarus is four days dead.

Jesus commands that the stone be moved from the gaping mouth of the tomb, despite the most mundane of protests: there will be an odor! But they do it. They move the stone, perhaps because of the power of Jesus’ command more than from any sort of belief in what will happen or will not.

Now it is one thing to command the living, and quite another to command the dead. Jesus cries, “Lazarus! Come out!” And the earth holds

its breath. What will happen? Will anything happen? Will nothing happen? Put yourself there in the crowd. Which are you more ready to deal with—the silence, the stillness, the finality of death? Or the possibility of life? Aren't you at least a little bit afraid that Lazarus won't come out? Aren't you almost more afraid that he will? Can it possibly be true that God's power for life is so vivid in Jesus—the health, the energy, the vitality, the warmth, the truth and light and hope, the laughter, the love—can it possibly be true that the sheer *life* of him is a clearer window to our destiny than is this tomb? Can you believe that? Can you trust that? Can you stake your life on that?

Martha did. At least she said that she did. “I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus told her. God's love is not about some distant and abstract end time, some far off last day of resurrection. “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” Either that power for life is real or it isn't. Either it is true here and now or it is never true. “Yes, Lord,” she replies. “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Did she answer the question? Perhaps she said more than she even knew. “Yes, Lord, I believe...” It's not a question of proof, or simple assent to a philosophical proposition. It's a question of trust: what or whom do we trust? Do we have faith in God's power for life? There is the possibility at least that we are all deluded—that, as the Apostle Paul put it, “... we are of all people most to be pitied.” (I Corinthians 15:19) Martha declares her faith. And then, with the rest of the world, she waits.

We live our lives, you and I, within that pause: between the command, “Lazarus, come out!” and the response. We live our lives, with all our joys and sadness, fulfillments and frustrations, moments of surpassing glory and unimaginable despair, in the choice of whether or not to dare to hope. “I am the resurrection and the life... Do you believe this?” The question hangs in the air. In a sense, it is all that matters.

I used to think that there was some sort of belief-o-meter that God had hooked up to us; that if we could somehow muster enough whatever it takes to believe what can never be demonstrated—if we really *believe*, and succeed in pretending to everybody else and especially to ourselves that we don't wonder even a little bit whether Lazarus is coming out of there or not—in other words, if the needle on the belief-o-meter goes past the crucial line and into the green zone, then we win the grand prize, which is an all expense paid trip to heaven. Did you believe that... or think you were

supposed to? Beat the meter and win the trip... sort of like a spiritual polygraph test, except that God doesn't have to hook us up to a machine, and we don't get to pick the time when we take the test, it just sort of happens. That's what I thought Jesus was saying about eternal life, and I always knew that I would flunk the test, if I hadn't already flunked it without realizing it, because I was so much like that man with the sick child in Mark's Gospel. "I believe," he said, "help my unbelief." (Mark 9:24) The two have always been together in me, wrestling endlessly, belief and unbelief. I knew I could never beat the belief-o-meter.

But I no longer think that this is what Jesus means. The question about belief is not about intellectual assent. It is about ultimate trust. The name of the game is *You Bet Your Life*, all right. But it's not in the sense of a reward or punishment meted out for correctness in theology. No, this teaching underscores the simple fact that we become like that which we believe. We become like that to which we're committed. We become like that to which we give ourselves. And so the question is, are you going to live your life as though this is all there is, as though nothing lasts beyond your last gasp, as though you and yours are all that matters, as though any difference you might make dies with you anyway, so there isn't any difference? Are you going to live your life as though the silence is all there is unless you fill it up with noise of your own creation? Or will you live your life as though the final word is a word of Good News... as though the bottom line is a punch line... as though it just might be OK that everything we think of as life passes away, as though it might be all right to let go because this is not all there is? Will you live your life as though there is something greater than yourself to which to give yourself, as though in giving yourself away—and only in giving yourself away—you will find out who you most truly are? That's the question. *You Bet Your Life*: where do you place your bet? What do you think you're here for? You finish the story: in your version, is Lazarus coming out of that tomb or not?

I think he is, because I've seen folks every bit as dead come out of places every bit as dry. I think he is, because I know what that tomb looks like on the inside. I think he's coming out of there because the God I know is a God of life. "I am the resurrection and the life," says Jesus. "Do you believe this?"

To believe in something beyond this life is to open up a myriad of possibilities within it. To believe that there is more going on than meets the eye makes it possible for us to appreciate with a lot more wonder and

gratitude what does meet the eye. To know that there is more, is to allow the world and the people in it to be the world and the people in it, and not to expect them somehow to meet the deep hunger within us which is, after all, a hunger for God. To believe in the transcendent power of life is to be able to let go, to let life flow through us rather than getting a death grip on it because, when it comes to life, there is always a lot more where that came from.

This is the hope of eternal life. This is the possibility which begins the moment we choose to live—even with our doubts—as though Lazarus is coming out of there, and life is a coming out party. This is the conviction that is at the center of our lives.

Lazarus, come out! We're waiting.

Amen

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Worship and Church School: 9:00 and 11:00 AM