

The Raising of Lazarus

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What a wonderful story! John is a master story teller, he vividly portrays his characters, and he creates suspense in the story, he breaks off and gives us time to think, and ponder on what will come next. John is the only gospel writer to include this story. His was the last of the gospels to be written and it is thought the others may have been wanting to protect Lazarus from unwelcome attention when they wrote theirs, the danger was no doubt passed by the time John is writing.

Did it really happen? I think we can probably say, yes. The reason many people think that this story is true and fairly accurate is because of the fact that John shows Jesus crying. It is one of the most remarkable moments in the whole gospel story. You see, no one in the early church who was venerating Jesus, wanting to make Jesus special and holy and also wanting to celebrate Jesus' own victory over death, would have invented such a thing. No, if you are writing about a 'hero', you don't have him cry! But John does. He shows Jesus to not only be fully human and capable of crying but also here is the 'Word', the Word who created the world we live in weeping for his friend who has died. Here then John shows us that God can cry with us. God through Jesus his Son cries with us at all the sad times in our lives. He feels for us and with us. This is another reason why this story is remarkable.

Now let us look again at the story.

Jesus has three close friends, they are no doubt disciples or followers although not part of the twelve who go with Jesus everywhere. Yes, Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary are great friends of Jesus. Now when Lazarus falls ill, his sisters send straight away to tell Jesus in the hope that he will help. They must have seen him heal other people countless times, and they put their trust in Jesus. But he doesn't come! Well, not straight away anyhow. He waits two days before setting out. He sends no message to say he'll be along shortly. Jesus is silent.

However, he is not silent. He is praying. This is what Jesus does when there are difficult things to do or decisions to be made. He stayed where he was and prayed.

Eventually he sets out, even though the disciples are worried about him. They fear that there are many who want to kill Jesus – it might be dangerous to go back to Bethany because it is so very near to Jerusalem where the trouble is brewing.

When Jesus arrives, the journey having taken over a day, he finds that Lazarus has meanwhile died. In fact Lazarus has been in the grave for four days. The sisters must be heart broken. In deed Martha says – if only you had been here he wouldn't have died. And now Jesus says a remarkable thing, 'I am the resurrection and the life,' Jesus is saying that he is resurrection, its not just an idea (a doctrine) it is a person. Resurrection is not just something in the future, it's a person standing right in front of Mary and teasing her at a time like this. Yes, teasing her to make a leap of faith – that is - hope and trust.

You see the story shows us that if we think, "What if..." we should bring that to Jesus just as Martha did. Tell Jesus the problem. Ask for his 'Why?' Then be prepared for a response – it may take time, but it will come. It may not fit into our neat little plans, but it is God's future, and the key is faith.

Mary is with the mourners – friends and neighbours who have gathered in the house to share in the family's sorrow. Mary repeats the 'If only you had been here,' – no doubt something that the sisters have been saying to each other since their brother died. And when Jesus comes to the grave he is so moved that he cries.

Now here I must mention that Jesus didn't march in with a magic formula to restore Lazarus to life, no, he does the opposite – he weeps. He weeps for our sorrows he shares the grief of the world but he is also grieving and weeping for the death that is to come – his own death, not far away.

Jesus asks for the stone to be removed from the grave – but NO! – says Martha – don't do it – there will be a terrible smell. She fears that the body will have been decomposing and the smell will be awful. "Believe!" Is what Jesus replies.

When the stone is moved aside Jesus thanks God for answering prayer. Yes the prayers of his two days apparent silence have been answered – for there was no smell!

Lazarus was alive, and no doubt had been for some time – he hadn't started to decompose because his blood was still pumping round his body as he lay still waiting for Jesus. Jesus had prayed about Lazarus and asked his Father what should be done – but also he had been praying about his own death and what should be done. He asked his Father God – 'How will it all pan out!'

Lazarus walks out of the grave and people had to rush to help him out of the wrappings around his body. Lazarus brings his grave wrappings out with him – Jesus some days later will leave his behind – showing a major difference between the two resurrections. You see Lazarus has come back to life, but of course he will eventually die as we all will. The difference is that when Jesus is resurrected he comes out to a new sort of life – one that lasts for ever.

In this remarkable story Jesus brings God's love and power into sharp and clear focus in one small place – then that love could go out into the rest of the world. There was no smell – Lazarus was alive – prayer had been answered – a command brings Lazarus out into 'light and life.' Jesus prayed for Lazarus but also himself – that he will come through and do his Father's will.

If Jesus needed to spend time praying and waiting – then so should we – God's ways are not our ways – God's time is not the same as our time – Yes we may need to wait a long time for our prayers to be answered – for our 'If only's' to be answered, but we must wait and have patience and faith.

"Come and see," we say to Jesus – we lead him in tears to the place of our deepest sorrows – "Come and see," he says back – as he leads us into a place of light and love.

Lent is a time for waiting and praying, a time to ask God to take the common clay of our beings and make us into what He would have us be, for this is a great miracle indeed. **Amen.**