

LAZARUS' STORY IS THE WORLD'S STORY

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John tells us in the last line of his Gospel (John 20:25) that there are many stories about Jesus that he had to leave out.

He says the world could not contain all the books that could be written. And in a sense, that is not hyperbole, because every story about God or man or the cosmos in all the libraries of the world—every story that offers forgiveness or healing or justice or deliverance or mercy or truth—is about Christ.

And yet I want to suggest that the Gospel story about Lazarus of Bethany retells the scriptural story of God and man and the world from beginning to end. This Gospel story contains the entire library of the Bible in one chapter!

Lazarus is Adam and Eve and Abraham and Sarah and Samson and Delilah and David and Bathsheba and Daniel and Isaiah. Lazarus is, in the words of Ezekiel, “the whole house of Israel” (Ezekiel 37:11).

Lazarus is you and me, and

everyone one who has ever lived or ever will live.

Like Genesis, the Lazarus story of John 11 begins with a diagnosis of the human condition, and of the disposition of the heart of God towards humanity even in this horrific illness we bear. We are told that Lazarus is sick. And we are told that Jesus loves Lazarus. It's important that we know both of those things.

We are sick with death. And God loves us, even in our illness.

“Master, the one who you love so very much is sick” (John 11:3).

These are the words of Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, to Jesus. You remember Mary, the woman who Luke tells us “lived a sinful life,” the one who anoints the feet of Jesus with perfume and dries them with her hair. And Jesus loves Mary in all

her illness and Mary loves Jesus because the one who is forgiven much loves much (Luke 7:47).

John tells us that Lazarus is ill. He has contracted the same disease that infects every man, woman and child. He is infected with death. And just as in Genesis, we who are dying, alienated from the God who made us from nothing for love alone, are given a promise:

“This sickness [of Lazarus's] is not fatal. It will become an occasion to show God's glory by glorifying God's Son” (John 11:4).

The Son, we are told in the beginning of the Genesis story, will crush the head of the serpent, the source of death, his final enemy—he will trample the snake who seeks to steal, kill and destroy humanity.

And as the story of Lazarus continues, we are told that God in Jesus Christ will draw near to Jerusalem—he will approach danger and death,

putting himself in harm's way, risking his life in order to heal and save Lazarus.

“Rabbi...the

Jewish leaders are out to kill you, and you're going back?” (John 11:8).

While the disciples think Lazarus is simply taking a nap and that there's no earthly reason for their Rabbi to risk so much, Jesus is serious. He always is when he's talking about death. He knows the reality of our situation. He knows Lazarus is dead. He knows we are dying.

In this Gospel story that tells the whole story of Scripture, there is also the great mystery of God's inexplicable waiting in the face of death. Jesus does not go immediately to Bethany.

God knows Lazarus is dying and yet he lingers. John's Gospel tells us that when God in Christ finally arrives, Lazarus has been dead four days.

This is not news to us. The whole house of Israel is dead. All of those people who fill the pages of

Scripture are dead. So many have died. And so many are dying. And so many are still waiting. Waiting for God.

Israel waited for centuries for the Messiah. And we wait. The world waits.

We wait in all the cemeteries of the world, and beside every tomb. We hope and we doubt and we grieve and we cry. But we do not cry or wait or grieve alone.

But I am getting ahead of the story John tells. We have to wait some more. Before we get to the tomb of Lazarus, we must meet Jesus on the road. And in the figure of Martha we hear our own grief and our own perplexity in the face of death:

“Master, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21).

Where were you? What took you so long? Don't you know we needed you? If you had only been here. These and many

other words we speak at the graves of our loved ones, and over the destruction and death already present in our personal histories.

And yet what a beautiful, astonishing reply Martha receives, a reply that reveals the character of God and the character of the new humanity that is present among us in Jesus:

“You don't have to wait for the End. I am, right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25).

This is *the* question life poses to us. This is not just God's question for Martha. **This is the question our human existence poses to us.**

Do we *trust* in the face of our collective illness amid a broken world that Jesus Christ is Life

and Resurrection? Can we reply as Martha replies?

“Yes, Master. All along I have believed that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who comes into the world” (John 11:27).

Martha is the voice of Spirit-enabled response to this startling declaration of Jesus. And by the same bounteous Spirit we join her.

And the *reason* we can hope even as we wait? We have hope in the middle of a fragile and grief-stricken world because we do not wait alone.

We wait with God. We wait with a God who weeps with us as one of us:

“Jesus wept” (John 11:35).

I imagine that Christ stood there by the tomb of Lazarus and just sobbed, like a baby. This is not only Jesus the human friend of Lazarus, who on many occasions enjoyed laughter and wine and late night conversation with his

companion. This is Jesus, the God who made Lazarus, who loves Lazarus. This the God and the human who loves us.

And we are told by John not only that God is sad. We are told that he is “deeply troubled.” We are told that he is angry. But not at Lazarus, and not at humanity. His anger is directed at God's enemies: death, hell and the grave.

This gospel about Lazarus reveals God's radical identification with death-bound humanity, a humanity personified in Mary and Martha and Lazarus—I will say it again because the Gospel says it—whom Christ loves.

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And Christ Jesus loves us, too. He weeps with us at the tombs of our beloved dead. And he not only cries. He is angry—angry at death, that has taken his friend and left his loved ones in such grief.

And so, here at the end of the story, we find ourselves standing with the mourners by the simple cave cut out of the hillside in Bethany, and the heavy stone has been rolled against it. And Lazarus has been dead four days and he stinks so bad because death reeks.

And there in the human flesh of Jesus is the God whose habit is forgiveness. And there Christ stands with conflicting emotions by the tomb of Lazarus, and by every tomb—the ones that are still marked, the ones we visit from time to time, and by the countless tombs that are lost to the decay of time. Here, at the tomb of Lazarus, God stands by the common grave that is the lot of all humans.

And we hear the majestic Voice, the divine Voice of a Lamb slain before the foundation of the world, the human Voice of the Word that in the beginning spoke the worlds into being from nothing for love alone, and he shouts,

“Lazarus, come out!” (John 11:43).

We hear the great Voice of God that calls us back to being forever. Jesus says, *“Take off his grave clothes and set him free,”* and his words are a universal declaration. The resurrection word to Lazarus is also our resurrection word. Jesus takes from us all the grave clothes that bind us to death.

And it does not matter if our bones have become dry dust swirling in a valley or shifting silt at the bottom of the ocean, and it matters not if there’s not one trace of our DNA to be discovered. His love can call us back to life from nothing.

Listen to this prophecy in Ezekiel:

“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.’ 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. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 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” (Ezekiel 37:11-14).

And so today, with Martha we trust that Jesus Christ is the Messiah. That *he is Resurrection*. That *he is Life*. And the promise is that he will raise us too, because Resurrection is what Christ is and what Christ does. And not only “some day”—his Resurrection Life resides in us now. □

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