

Lazarus, Come Forth!

Jesus approached the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across it. "Take away the stone," Jesus directed. Martha, the dead man's sister, said to him, "Lord, it has been four days now; surely there will be a stench!" Jesus replied, "Did I not assure you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" They then took away the stone and Jesus looked upward and said: "God, I thank you for having heard me. I know that you always hear me but I have said this for the sake of the crowd, that they may believe that you sent me." Having said this, he called loudly, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, bound hand and foot with linen strips, his face wrapped in a cloth. "Unbind him," Jesus told them, "and let him go free."

-- John 11:1-45

The story of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, a story of death and despair, life and hope, mirrors our own predicament, our own times, our own hearts. If we look carefully, we can see ourselves in every character. If we notice the rock bottom despair in this tale, we will recognize our own despair and our own complicity in the powers of death. We will also hear the liberating voice of Jesus calling us out to new life.

The devout Judeans have just tried to kill the unarmed Jesus. Now, upon hearing the news that his dear friend Lazarus is dying and then dead, Jesus announces that he is going to see Lazarus, which means he is going right back into the thick of things where his would-be murderers await him. This decision terrifies the disciples who fear getting killed (as we would too), and so they argue with Jesus. "Don't you realize those people are trying to kill you? We can't go back there, Jesus!" they exclaim.

But notice: Jesus calls Lazarus, "*Our* friend." Lazarus is their friend too! "What are you willing to do for your friends?" Jesus asks. "Are you willing to lay down your life for your friends? Come, let's go."

This is a story about friendship, about community, about nonviolent love. For Jesus, laying

down one's life for one's friends is not just a duty, it is natural. Ashamed, the disciples declare, Yes, they will go with Jesus to Bethany and beyond. "Let us go and die with him," macho Thomas asserts.

But what happens? They disappear! The twelve are nowhere to be seen in the rest of the story. Not until the next chapter do they reappear with Jesus in the desert far away from controversy.

The image we are presented with, as this episode unfolds, is of Jesus, walking alone to Bethany, back to face the crowd that just tried to kill him, there to stand with his friend. Jesus -- vulnerable, unarmed, the one who values friendship more than anyone else--walks alone.

Next, we read about the professional mourners, weeping over Lazarus. These are probably the same religious people who just threatened to kill Jesus, now fulfilling their religious obligation to mourn Lazarus. They show public sorrow for his death, yet their hearts are filled with murder.

Then we meet Martha and Mary, the beloved disciples, the two heroic women who come closest towards accepting Christ. They have begun the ritual thirty days of mourning and they are beside themselves with grief.

Lazarus has been dead for four days. Why are we told this? According to their belief, the soul of the dead person leaves the body after three days. In effect, you could raise a person from the dead after two days, but after three days, don't bother. There is nothing there. Lazarus is dead four days now, which means, Lazarus is gone. Jesus is too late. There is nothing that can be done.

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," they cry.

Such utter hopelessness sounds all too familiar. Deep down, we feel the same disappointment and faithlessness in Christ before the power of death in the world. "Lord, if you had been here," we mutter like Martha and Mary, "then perhaps so many of our relatives and friends and our sisters and brothers around the world would not have died, would not be dying; then death would not hold power over us; then we would not wage war and support injustice or hang on the nuclear brink." And

the lonely, unarmed, vulnerable Jesus looks us in the eye and says: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever is alive here and now, and believes in me as I walk the way of life and confront the forces of death, will never die." And he puts the question to us: Do you believe this?

When Jesus sees Mary and the others weeping, we are told, he is "troubled in spirit." But according to the original Greek, Jesus is not just in turmoil, he is enraged. "Where have you laid him?" Jesus asks. The people of the culture of death are eager to show him the tomb. They say to Jesus, "Come and See." These are the same precious words of invitation which Jesus used at the beginning of John's Gospel to welcome his friends into his new way of life. Now, the mourners seek to recruit Jesus in discipleship to the culture of death. When Jesus weeps, they shake their heads in disbelief. "If only he had done something!" This too sounds all too familiar. How often do we also shake our heads in disbelief and say, "If only he had done something"?

Nobody believes in Jesus. Everybody believes in death. How does this make Jesus feel? Jesus has given his life to everyone; he comes with the gift of life; he offers every possibility for new life; he stands with the God of life--and how is he received? He is rejected. "Hey, Jesus! Come and see our ways of death..."

Jesus breaks down and weeps. As Wes Howard-Brook explains in his commentary, *Becoming Children of God*, contrary to everything we have been taught about this great tale, Jesus does not weep because Lazarus has died. Earlier Jesus told us that he rejoices--he is glad--at the news of Lazarus' death. Maybe, Jesus thinks, just maybe, we will come to believe in him now. Instead, Jesus finds everyone given over to the control of death. And he breaks down crying. Jesus weeps because everyone in the scene--the disciples, the religious folk, even his beloved friends, Martha and Mary--every one of them and all of us, believe not in the God of life but in the culture of death. Jesus weeps not because his friend has died, but because every drop of faith and hope has died. Similarly, all of

us, like all the characters in the story, at one point or another, say, "I'm sorry Lord, there's nothing that can be done. There is no hope. You gave it a good try, Jesus, but death does get the last word."

But the story is not over! Jesus approaches the tomb. The image of Jesus walking towards the tomb stands as one of the great moments in history. Imagine the Chinese dissident student standing before a column of tanks in Tiannanmen Square. Or Gandhi's nonviolent followers marching toward the Dharasana Salt Mines and the soldiers with their clubs ready to strike. Or Dr. King and the civil rights activists, facing the troops, the dogs and the fire hoses of Birmingham.

Jesus confronts death. One can almost see his mind sizing up the powers of death and concluding that if he ever has to occupy one of these chambers of death, his stay will be--brief.

There, standing before the tomb, Jesus is the God of life. As the Living God who issues the great commandments--"Thou shalt not kill!" "Beat your swords into plowshares!" and "Love your enemies!"--Jesus declares three new commandments.

First, *"Take away the stone!"*

Martha pleads with him. "Not that, Lord! No, Lord, you don't understand; there's nothing that can be done. It's been four days now. Lazarus is gone; death has won. Please don't make us confront death. Please don't trouble yourself," which means, "Please don't trouble us anymore more, Jesus--even if you are the Son of God." Finally, she blurts out, "For God's sake, think of the stench!"

Here we have the voice of total despair, the voice of no-hope-whatsoever, the voice which says, "Once you're dead, you're dead." This voice sounds all too familiar, because it too resounds within each one of us. She does what we do: she resists the command to take away the stone. Why does she do that? Why do we resist this great commandment? Because we do not want resurrection. We do not want new life. We can not handle that much hope, that much freedom and its implications.

We too prefer to live off the comforts of the culture of death.

But Jesus insists: *You can not afford the luxury of despair. Take away the stone!*

So, the stone is taken away and for the first time in all eleven chapters of John's Gospel, at this climactic moment, Jesus speaks directly to God. But instead of the prayer that Martha hoped for, in which she asserts that God will grant whatever Jesus asks, Jesus does not ask God for anything. Jesus does not pray, "Please, God, raise Lazarus from the dead." He does not tell God what to do. Instead, he offers the most radical prayer of all. Before anything has happened, he says simply, "Thank you." To resist death, Jesus shows us, we have to be people of contemplative prayer, people who give thanks to the God of life, people who trust that God hears our longings for new life.

Next, the second command, *"Lazarus, come out!"*

Lazarus represents humanity, all of us buried in the tombs of the empire of death.

"Leave your tombs!" Jesus shouts. "Come out from the power of death. Live free from the forces of death!"

Lazarus appears, but he is bound in burial clothes. He cannot hear, see, speak, reach out, or walk, actions which symbolize discipleship to Christ. Lazarus is still a victim of the culture. And so the third command: *"Unbind him and let him go!"*

Mark's Gospel offers the command to "bind the strong man," the forces of death. Here, we have the flip side--the command to unbind the weak and let them go free.

Do the people do it? We do not know. The story is left unfinished.

Lazarus is still standing at the tomb waiting for us. Our mission today could not be clearer: unbind humanity from the shroud of death and set it free to live in peace.

Jesus' raising of Lazarus symbolizes all the nonviolent struggles of liberation from oppression and death throughout history. It is the story of Dr. King and the civil rights movement calling forth

African-Americans from the tomb of racial injustice and unbinding them. It is the story of Nelson Mandela and the resisting masses ordering the stone of apartheid taken away, in the face of total despair, and the South African people coming forward. It is the story of Dorothy Day and her Catholic Worker friends refusing to take cover in fallout shelters during nuclear war air-raid practice drills.

It is our story too.

In Washington, D.C., where I have lived most of my life, we are surrounded by death, from the handguns and knives on street corners; to the U.S. Congress which contracts against the poor, votes for executions, builds new prisons and cuts healthcare; to the Pentagon, with its preparations for war, the greatest institution for the promotion of death in the history of humanity. Death gets the last word.

And yet, and yet, in our churches, we gather in prayer; we sing; we hear the Word of God; we break bread and pass the cup; we join hands with one another; we offer a sign of peace; and we go forward into the streets to say No to death and Yes to life.

When my friends and I entered the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base and hammered on an F15 nuclear-capable fighter bomber, in keeping with Isaiah's mandate to beat swords into plowshares, we were trying to take these commands to heart: to roll away the imperial stone of militaristic death; to call forth those entombed in the Pentagon and its military bases; and to unbind those held by the cultural trappings of death, the nuclear shroud. We were arrested, jailed, tried and convicted, yet I discovered, we can confront the powers of death. Liberation from the powers of death comes with a price, which Jesus showed with his blood on the cross. But fear not!, we are told. The God of resurrection and life has further plans for us. The stone will be rolled away!

Our Gospel is nothing less than a call to say No to the culture of death that we live in; a

summons to stand against the forces of death in the Spirit of resurrection and new life; and a command to be people of hope in a land of utter despair.

Jesus commands us: Take away the stone of death that keeps you all entombed in a culture of death. Call one another out of the tombs into new life. Unbind the dead and let them go free. Help one another out of the ties that ensnare you in the culture of death and liberate one another into the freedom of nonviolence.

We all feel the numbness of despair: There is nothing that can be done. We will always have nuclear weapons, the culture of death convinces us. We will always have war. We will always have violence. Death is in control. Militarism rules the land and our hearts.

Yet the voice of Jesus rings out across the centuries: *Take away the stone. Come out of your tombs. Unbind the oppressed and let them go free.*

Jesus summons us, in other words, to stand against the culture of death and say: no more despair; no more injustice; no more handguns; no more violence; no more death penalties; no more abortions; no more sexism; no more racism; no more homophobia; no more homelessness; no more starvation; no more consumerism; no more greed; no more contracts against the poor; no more Pentagon; no more CIA; no more Hiroshimas; which is to say, no more war, no more nuclear weapons, and no more big business legally profiting from systematic killing.

In other words, no more death.

As Daniel Berrigan once remarked, Jesus reverses Dante and says, "Take on hope all ye who enter here."

This God of resurrection and life cries out to us now more than ever, "Take away the stone of death! Come out of your tombs! Unbind the dead and let them go free! You are people of resurrection and life. You are alive. Live and let live."

Hope when all hope is gone. Good news indeed.

--From *Jesus the Rebel* by John Dear (available at www.sheedandward.com)