

# Raise the Dead

## John 11:1-44 (Common English Bible)

A certain man, Lazarus, was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This was the Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped his feet with her hair. Her brother Lazarus was ill.) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, saying, "Lord, the one whom you love is ill."

When he heard this, Jesus said, "This illness isn't fatal. It's for the glory of God so that God's Son can be glorified through it." Jesus loved Martha, her sister, and Lazarus. When he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was. After two days, he said to his disciples, "Let's return to Judea again."

The disciples replied, "Rabbi, the Jewish opposition wants to stone you, but you want to go back?"

Jesus answered, "Aren't there twelve hours in the day? Whoever walks in the day doesn't stumble because they see the light of the world. But whoever walks in the night does stumble because the light isn't in them."

He continued, "Our friend Lazarus is sleeping, but I am going in order to wake him up."

The disciples said, "Lord, if he's sleeping, he will get well." They thought Jesus meant that Lazarus was in a deep sleep, but Jesus had spoken about Lazarus' death.

Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died. For your sakes, I'm glad I wasn't there so that you can believe. Let's go to him."

Then Thomas (the one called Didymus) said to the other disciples, "Let us go too so that we may die with Jesus."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was a little less than two miles from Jerusalem. Many Jews had come to comfort Martha and Mary after their brother's death. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary remained in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died. Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you."

Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha replied, "I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

She replied, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, God's Son, the one who is coming into the world."

After she said this, she went and spoke privately to her sister Mary, "The teacher is here and he's calling for you." When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to Jesus. He hadn't entered the village but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were comforting Mary in the house saw her get up quickly and leave, they followed her. They assumed she was going to mourn at the tomb.

When Mary arrived where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died.”

When Jesus saw her crying and the Jews who had come with her crying also, he was deeply disturbed and troubled. He asked, “Where have you laid him?”

They replied, “Lord, come and see.”

Jesus began to cry. The Jews said, “See how much he loved him!” But some of them said, “He healed the eyes of the man born blind. Couldn’t he have kept Lazarus from dying?”

Jesus was deeply disturbed again when he came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone covered the entrance. Jesus said, “Remove the stone.”

Martha, the sister of the dead man, said, “Lord, the smell will be awful! He’s been dead four days.”

Jesus replied, “Didn’t I tell you that if you believe, you will see God’s glory?” So they removed the stone. Jesus looked up and said, “Father, thank you for hearing me. I know you always hear me. I say this for the benefit of the crowd standing here so that they will believe that you sent me.” Having said this, Jesus shouted with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Untie him and let him go.”

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“If you don’t stop that racket, you’re going to raise the dead!” Did your mom or dad ever say that to you? Did you ever say it to your kids or grandkids? I remember my mom saying it when my two brothers and I were making a lot of noise in the house.

Chip Brown heard it growing up. He said, “For years, my parents told me that I was making enough noise to wake the dead. This instilled in me the belief that should I make enough noise the dead would rise and walk around. This is not the case as I have tried several times. I have learned that trying this over long periods of time in a cemetery will indeed not raise the dead. It will however invoke the wrath of the police. So, kids when your parents say, “Stop that racket or you’ll raise the dead,” remember they have the dead and the police confused. (More of Chip’s Old Musings of Life)

Raising the dead is the reality of Easter. Remember Easter is not a one-day celebration. In the church calendar, it’s a seven-week season of resurrection and new life. We’ve been focused on Jesus’ resurrection stories for the past three weeks. Today I want to explore a story about our role in raising the dead.

Did you know that’s part of the commission Jesus gave his disciples and us? Matthew says: “Jesus sent his twelve harvest hands out with this charge: Go to the lost, confused people right here in the neighborhood. Tell them that the kingdom is here. Bring health to the sick. *Raise the dead*. Touch the untouchables. Kick out the demons. You have been treated generously, so live generously.” (Matthew 10:5-8, The Message)

In her book Jesus Freak Sara Miles writes: “Of all the things I thought I heard Jesus telling me to do, raising the dead was the most impossible to take literally... But...other things I’d thought of as metaphorical turned out to be real. Communion was food. Healing was touch. When I received love, freely, I wanted to give it away in the same spirit. Yet what could it possibly mean to raise the dead?”

She goes on, "I knew that to the extent new life was real...it had sprung, just as Jesus promised, from actual feeding, healing, forgiving. It didn't come from the sky, but from plates of enchiladas, the bruises of strangers, frustration and tears. Follow me, Jesus had said: just give the people something to eat, just touch them, just say you're sorry. And our lives had changed. But raising the dead didn't seem like work it was possible for humans to do."

It didn't seem possible in Jesus' day either. At least that's what Martha thinks. "I am the resurrection and the life, Jesus says. Those who believe in me, even though they die, they will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Martha, do you believe?"

It's four days after the funeral; Martha's brother, Lazarus, is dead and buried in a rock tomb. Mary and Martha send word to Jesus that his good friend is critically ill. But Jesus doesn't intercede. He waits two whole days and then tells his disciples, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe."

When they arrive in Bethany, Martha comes out and confronts Jesus. She says, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." Martha's broken heart is filled with grief and anger. She wants to know why Jesus waited. Why didn't he come when they sent word? Why did this have to happen? In her sorrow and suffering Martha lashes out.

Jesus responds, "Your brother will rise again." Martha thinks: "What kind of consolation is that? Every Jew believes that we'll all be resurrected on the last day." Martha thinks Jesus is talking about the sweet hereafter, that future event when God will resurrect everyone and everything in a glorious new creation. But that's not what Jesus means. Jesus is talking about the here and now. He is promising new life and new hope in the present.

When Jesus arrives at Lazarus' tomb, he gives two orders to the disciples and the grieving people. First, he tells them, "Roll the stone away." Jesus doesn't leave them wallowing in their grief. Nor does he let them be spectators. When it comes to raising the dead, Jesus expects us to get involved.

Martha, the grieving sister intervenes, "Jesus, Lazarus has been dead for four days. It's going to stink!" There's no getting around the reality of death in this story. This funeral scene is not sanitized. The Jews believed that the soul of the deceased hovered near the grave for three days. After that the end was permanent. Lazarus is as dead as a doornail and stench of death's decay is overwhelming.

Good Jews normally didn't have anything to do with a corpse. But in spite of the fear of defilement, they move the stone. Jesus pauses to pray. He pauses to remind everyone that God is the one at work. Then he calls Lazarus out, and the dead man rises from the grave. Jesus tells the disciples and others, "Unbind him and let him go."

"Roll away the stone! Unbind him, and let him go!" These instructions provide clues for our work in raising the dead. They remind us that we're not the ones who make resurrection happen. God is the one with the power to transform lifelessness and hopelessness. God is the one who can redeem dead-end situations. God is the one with power over life and death. And yet, God invites us to participate. God encourages us to get involved. God calls us to assist in raising the dead.

“Roll away the stone! Unbind him, and let him go!” In the movie, *The Hurricane*, Denzel Washington plays Rubin “Hurricane” Carter an African American middleweight boxer who is imprisoned for life for murders he didn’t commit in 1967. After exhausting every possibility for appeal, Carter tells his wife that he wants her to divorce him and to move on with life. He says, “I’m dead. Forget about me.”

The Hurricane uses his prison time to read, study, and eventually write a book about his life. In 1974 *The Sixteenth Round* is published and becomes a best seller, but then it’s soon forgotten. Years later, Lesera Martin, a Black teen buys a used copy of the book for a quarter. Moved by what he reads, the young man writes a letter to the Carter and the prisoner writes back.

The two begin a relationship that leads Lesera and his guardians to do something about the injustice. They move from Toronto to Trenton, New Jersey to work full-time on Carter’s case. They eventually find new evidence and, in 1985, Ruben Hurricane Carter’s conviction is overturned and he’s released from prison.

In the movie, the Hurricane says it was “no accident” that Lesera came across his autobiography. He reminds the young man that his name is a form of Lazarus, the one raised from death. The Hurricane tells Lesera that hate killed and buried him, forgotten, in the prison walls, but Lesera’s love raised him from the dead and gave him new life.

“Roll away the stone! Unbind him, and let him go!” Lesera Martin did just that. He engaged in raising Ruben Hurricane Carter from the deadly tomb of indifference and imprisonment. He put his hope into action and rolled away the stones of racism and injustice. He put his faith into action and unbound the cloths of past mistakes and systemic failures. He put his love into action and set an otherwise dead man free.

Do you know someone who is facing a dead-end situation? Roll away her stone and raise the dead!

Do you know someone whose faith is cold and lifeless? Roll away his stone and raise the dead!

Do you know someone who is entombed by depression or despair? Roll away her stone and raise the dead!

Do you know someone who’s bound up with grief and pain? Unbind him and raise the dead!

Do you know someone who is trapped by drugs or alcohol? Unbind her and raise the dead!

Do you know someone who is restricted by loneliness and fear? Unbind him and raise the dead!

Friends you and I can’t accomplish resurrection, that’s God’s job. But you and I can help raise the dead. Yes, we ordinary people, like Martha, can hope and believe in resurrection and new life. We may have doubts. We may not understand why Jesus trusts us to do his work. But God uses us to raise the dead, right here, right now. So, let’s get to work! Amen.

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Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church

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