

I Am the Resurrection and the Life

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"The Raising of Lazarus" by Vincent van Gogh (1890)

Prayer of Illumination

Gracious God,
we do not live by bread alone.
Let the heavenly food of the
scripture we are about to hear
nourish us today in the ways
of eternal life, through Jesus Christ,
the bread of heaven. Amen.

Background

Lazarus is the first person to be mentioned that Jesus loved. Lazarus' sisters Martha and Mary didn't even need to name his name to Jesus: *"The one you love is ill"* was all that was needed. In other words, if you love Lazarus, you'll come right away. But Jesus was late for the one he loved—*four days* late.

In Jewish thought at the time—the spirit left the body three days after death. So, there was no doubt, Lazarus was dead. The one who healed strangers who were blind and lame, forgot his friend who was sick. It was over... or was it?

Scripture: John 11:17-27 (NRSV)

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – I Am the Resurrection and the Life

It was December of 1849 and the twenty-seven-year-old novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky was in prison for being implicated in a conspiracy against the Russian czar. Without notice, he and his fellow prisoners were rounded up and brought to St. Petersburg square. There they were informed that they would be executed on the spot for their crimes.

Dostoyevsky had only a few short moments to prepare for what was happening: he was going before the firing squad. Emotions he never knew he had flooded him. He observed rays of light reflecting off the dome of the cathedral. All of life was seen for what it was: fleeting as those rays. He perceived the terror behind his fellow prisoners' brave faces. It was as if their hidden thoughts and emotions were revealed with crystal clarity to him in those final moments.

But then, at the last moment, a representative of the czar rode into the square announcing that all their sentences were commuted. No longer did they need to serve hard labor in Siberia. They were unbound from their chains and their death sentence commuted.

Dostoyevsky's brush with death and the intensity of his emotions gave him a new sensation: he felt utterly reborn. Death made him feel more alive. The experience was branded into his mind and soul for the rest of his life. It marked him. His close encounter with death intensified his empathy and observational powers. His faith was made more real. His life and writing were forever changed by this near-death experience, until the day he died.

Like Dostoyevsky, Lazarus was given a second shot at life. In fact, in many of the art depictions of Lazarus coming out of the tomb, he's in his birthday suit—coming out of the womb of the tomb in a second birth.

And so our story begins with this statement, "A man named Lazarus, who lived in Bethany..."

The name "Lazarus" means "God helps." And the town of "Bethany," some scholars suggest, is a play on words that mean "House of Affliction." So, the plot of the story is laid out for us: God helps a man in a house of affliction. This isn't just Lazarus' story, it's ours too. Sooner or later, for a short time or a long time, all of us will dwell in that same house of affliction. It's our human lot.

I feel right now our community has been dwelling in the house of affliction in some intense ways: Several parents are grieving the loss of children this week. Some of you have received tough news about cancer. Others are undergoing treatment, awaiting surgeries, or recovering from them. Another member witnessed a drive-by shooting earlier this week. Others of us are worrying about our parents we're caring for. There's a malaise and a heaviness we're fighting against as we near the two-year mark of the pandemic. It seems so hard to build any momentum—things feel stuck, worn thin. And yet, in our personal Bethanys, in our house of affliction, God's help for us is found in Jesus who comes to visit us. We've been promised that our house of affliction won't be our permanent residence. Jesus has prepared another place for us. The Father's dwelling place in heaven that has many mansions.

But let's get back to the beginning of the story. Martha and Mary sent Jesus a message: the one you love is gravely ill. Rather than taking the first flight out, Jesus strangely stays put. Today, there are times we wonder—did God forget to show up when I needed him most? Does he even care? By the time Jesus arrived in Bethany—he was four days late. His friend Lazarus was buried. He missed the funeral. When Jesus finally arrived on the scene, Mary stayed at home, but Martha, ever a woman of action, came out to confront Jesus, to put him in his place: Jesus, you blew it. *"If only you'd been here, my brother would not have died."* You healed blind and lame strangers, why couldn't you remember your dear friend? We're your best friends! Martha's sister Mary had the same response to Jesus later. If only you'd been here. If only.

But then Martha changes her tone: But even now, I know God will give you whatever you ask of him. Even now—Martha has a flicker of desperate hope. When Jesus is around, anything can happen—even at a graveside. "Your brother will rise again." "I know he will in the resurrection at the last day." Then Jesus utters his famous words:

"I AM the Resurrection and the Life." I AM the source of life. I am life itself.

Not I WAS, not I WILL BE, but I AM the resurrection and the life, RIGHT NOW. In the thick of death.

Resurrection always comes out of death. Resurrection is not a doctrine, not an idea, but a person, a real presence—Jesus—God's I AM. *"Those who believe in me, EVEN THOUGH they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."*

In Christ, we live, even in death. Do you believe this Martha? *"Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."* Martha made one of the greatest statements of faith in Scripture, in the midst of her brother's death. He was still in the tomb. She trusted Jesus, even when he was late. Here we learn that Jesus' delay and absence are compatible with his love, and can even be an expression of his love. And they are opportunities for us to express our faith.

I felt Jesus asking me this week: Do you believe this John? Do you believe this Immanuel? Really believe it? The Jesus life is a life that survives tragedy and affliction and death. One of the early symbols of resurrection is the mythological bird the phoenix rising from the ashes. We don't stay down, we're a rising up people.

But let's be clear: Jesus isn't saying that we aren't going to die. We all are, every one of us. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Lazarus died a second time, and remained in the tomb. Dostoyevsky eventually died, after being spared the firing squad. Cats, after their ninth life, die. There is no vaccine or antidote to death. Jesus never promised that. We all must eventually confront death. And that's why I love what Jesus does next. Not only is his divinity on full display, but his humanity. It's one of the shortest verses of the Bible and one of the best: *"Jesus wept."* This is what I love about Jesus, he wept. The good news is that Jesus still weeps—over friends, over his city Jerusalem. He feels and he cares. John tells us Jesus also felt other strong emotions: He was troubled and experienced inward turmoil. Jesus was disturbed and unsettled by the death of his friend. He would later sweat blood in the garden over his impending death. He went to the cross. He was laid in the tomb. But he didn't stay there. The resurrection was resurrected. The *"I AM the resurrection and the life,"* in the flesh, enters into our pain and loss—personally experiencing it firsthand. He gets it. He lived it. The tears of Jesus give permission to our tears now. He gives us the gift of tears.

The Greek concept of God was that one of God's main attributes was *apatheia* which means an inability to feel. To be moved was a sign of weakness, that you were overcome with emotion, under someone else's power, that you could be affected and impacted. In other words, the Greeks believed God was distant, passionless, compassionless, and unmoved. Jesus gives us a very different picture: God cares. God is moved. In Christ, God gives us not a principle or a proposition, but a person. A real, living, breathing, feeling person who is present with us in our predicament and pain. The Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief and pain, shares our loss with us. The tears of Jesus show us that he not only loves Lazarus, but he loves you, loves me, he loves the world. This is the gospel, the good news we can have and hold. Jesus fully enters into life and death with us. We can't get rid of him. He just won't let us out of his loving embrace.

But death is not the final word in this story. Death is powerful, but not all-powerful. With everyone present, Jesus prayed and then commanded the stone covering Lazarus' grave to be pushed to the side. Martha, ever practical and thinking of logistics and calendar dates, was a little skeptical about removing the stone. Jesus, it's been four days—the open tomb is going to stink to high heaven. *"If you believe you will see the glory of God."* *"Yes Lord, I believe."*

Jesus is the One in whom there is life. He is the One we follow. He's the Author of Life who survived death on our behalf. There's nothing to be afraid of. *"Where, O death is your victory? Where is your sting?"*

Do you believe this? Jesus gives us life. Not just existence. Not just doing time. Occupying space. But life, abundant life. Our hope is bound to the resurrected Christ who is life. Even though he was crucified, dead, and buried, he rose again. And so will we. Even in our dying, we live. Resurrection is designed for situations where life is absent. Death is our final enemy to face. And when we do, we will encounter a defeated foe. Death has been overcome by the resurrection. For us, death is now the doorway to life. We can be scared, but we have nothing to be afraid of.

So Immanuel, Like Lazarus, let's "come forth" from the seclusion of our tomb. Let's push aside those stones that block the light and air. Like Lazarus and Jesus, it's time for us to vacate the tomb, and make it an empty tomb. Let's shake off our slumber, rip off our grave clothes, leave the death shroud behind us, just like Lazarus and just like Jesus. For we believe there's not only life after death, but there's life before death. Whether living or dying, we belong to God. We belong to *"The Resurrection and The Life."*

Amen.

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