

The Resurrection Promise

By Adria Connell

Every resurrection in the Bible is different. In fact, we are supposed to take different messages from each of the examples of resurrection we find in Scripture. When Jesus raises Jairus's daughter from the dead, He does it in secret. He allows only Peter, John, and James to accompany Him into the house with Jairus, and He tells them that the 12-year-old girl is only sleeping. Afterward, He swears them all to secrecy, consistent with a pattern throughout the Gospels: Jesus reveals His identity according to His own timing, repeatedly restricting its disclosure before the appointed hour has come.

When He raises Lazarus from the dead, however, Jesus makes sure the miracle is public because the resurrection of His friend is both an act of love and an announcement. It is an acknowledgment that He is truly the Messiah, the Son of God, and He is well aware that it will lead to a more aggressive conspiracy among the Jewish chief priests to kill Him. The death of Lazarus is also an opportunity for Jesus to reach out to the larger community of Jews who either do not believe in Him or recognize that He has power but remain doubtful of His messianic identity.

When Jesus receives the message that Lazarus is ill, He is in the area across the Jordan River where John the Baptist began his ministry. The Gospel takes care to note that Jesus waits two days before leaving for Bethany after receiving the message about Lazarus's illness. Given the distance between Bethany and the place across the Jordan where Jesus was staying, the messenger's journey would have taken approximately a day. If Lazarus died and was buried on the day the messenger left Bethany, as the chronology suggests, he was likely already dead by the time Jesus received the message. Jesus' two-day delay therefore did not cause Lazarus's death; rather, by the time Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. Before leaving, Jesus explains that Lazarus's illness will show the glory of God and, just as He described Jairus's daughter, says that Lazarus is only sleeping. Jesus deliberately delays His departure despite loving Lazarus and his sisters, knowing what the outcome will be.

Jesus explains to Martha that the glory of God will be shown through the resurrection of Lazarus, but this becomes clear only after Lazarus emerges from the tomb. The writer of the Gospel of John takes great care to reveal the narrative of this resurrection measure by measure because every step is crucial to understanding what this resurrection means for the body of Christ. Three times Jesus hears essentially the same message from the mourners—Martha, Mary, and the Jews who have come to visit the sisters: if only Jesus had come in time, He could have saved Lazarus from dying.

Scripture tells us that Jesus wept, groaned within Himself, and was deeply moved. Jesus wept with the mourners because that is who God is. God is compassionate and is not indifferent to our suffering. Yet their grief also reveals the limits of what they believe Jesus can do. Again and again, the mourners imagine that Jesus could have prevented Lazarus's death. None of them seems prepared for what He is actually about to demonstrate: His power is not limited to preventing death. He has power over death itself.

Throughout the passage, divine action is accompanied by human response. Martha is asked to believe; the mourners are asked to move the stone; and after Lazarus emerges, they are told to unbind him. They cannot raise Lazarus—only God can do that—but faith calls them to participate in what God is doing.

As Jesus prepares to resurrect Lazarus, He never stops teaching. He asks the mourners to take away the stone and open the tomb. This is significant because Jesus has the power to remove the stone Himself but chooses not to.

Martha is worried because, after four days, Lazarus's body has already begun to decay, and there will be an odor when the tomb is opened. Jesus reminds her that if she believes, she will see the glory of God. Faith does not create the power of God, but it opens us to what God can do in our lives.

The mourners move the stone and open the tomb. Jesus then thanks God for hearing Him and makes a point of saying that He knows God always hears Him, but He says this so that the people standing around Him will believe that He was sent by God. Then, with a loud voice of authority, He commands Lazarus to come forth.

Lazarus emerges bound hand and foot with grave clothes, his face wrapped in a cloth. Again, Jesus could have removed the grave clothes Himself, but instead He tells the mourners to unbind him and let him go. According to the Torah, contact with a corpse rendered a person ritually unclean and required purification before that person could again participate fully in the religious community. Yet Jesus tells the mourners themselves to unbind Lazarus. They are not being asked to handle a corpse. Lazarus is alive. The man who entered the tomb in death now walks out of it, and Jesus commands the community around him to remove the last physical signs of his burial.

It occurred to me as I read this passage that there are still so many believers, like myself, who acknowledge the power of God to save us and yet continue to walk around in our grave clothes. We get into the habit of thinking that God can work only under certain conditions and within certain parameters, but we need to remember that with God all things are possible. Resurrection power has no limits. God Himself sets limits, but nothing can limit God.

The same power that raised Jesus from the dead, the same power that allowed Him to heal the sick, the lame, and the blind, the same power that enabled Him to walk on water and calm storms, is in us when we are believers in Christ (Romans 8:11). The Resurrection Promise is not only to be fulfilled after we die. "Rest in peace" is not just a phrase to be engraved on our tombstones. The Resurrection Promise is embodied not only in John 3:16, but also in John 10:10. Jesus died and rose again so that our lives here on earth could be redeemed and resurrected, and then we could reach the Promised Land.