

“I am the resurrection and the life.

**Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,
and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”**

John 11:25–26

The Death of Lazarus

JOHN 11:1–27 ¹Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” ⁸The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” ⁹Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” ¹¹After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” ¹²The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you

may believe. But let us go to him.”¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” ²³Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

The narrative of the raising of Lazarus is the climax of the book of signs, with its seven manifestations of Jesus’ identity, and the transition to the book of glory, in which Jesus will give his life as the fullest revelation of his glory. The news that “he whom you love is ill” (verse 3) is a call to return to Judea, the place where his life is in danger from the religious authorities in Jerusalem (verse 8). Jesus is going to Judea for Lazarus, but also to meet the decisive danger of crucifixion and, ultimately, his glorious victory. Caring for those one loves is often a perilous undertaking that takes us to a dangerous place. But it is the only way to love as Jesus loved.

Like most of the Gospel of John, the account of Lazarus must be read on at least two levels. It is about a man named Lazarus, a dear friend whom Jesus loved. But it is also about each of us, whom Jesus loves, and about the universal fate of death with which we must all sooner or later cope. Lazarus represents all of us as we come to Jesus for healing and life.

On hearing the news of Lazarus’ illness, Jesus looks beyond the immediate situation to its end. The end is not death, but God’s glory and the glorification of the Son of God (verse 4). This is the reason for the curious comment that Jesus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, “stayed two days longer in the place where he was” (verse 6). The glory of which Jesus speaks is possible only

through death—first the death of Lazarus and then the death of Jesus himself.

When Jesus enters the town of Bethany, his first encounter is with Martha, who has come to meet Jesus. Her initial greeting might strike us as a reprimand that Jesus delayed too long and did not come in time to save Lazarus from death (verse 21). But her words seem to be more of a statement of her confidence in the power of Jesus to heal the sick. If Jesus had been present a few days earlier, he surely would have made Lazarus well. She continues her greeting by stating her confidence that, even in the present situation of death, God would do whatever Jesus asks (verse 22).

The response of Jesus is intended to draw Martha to a deeper level of faith in Jesus. His initial statement that Lazarus will rise again (verse 23) seems to Martha only a pious consolation expressing a common Jewish belief in the resurrection of the just at the end of time. Like the common Christian sentiment at funerals, “He’s in a better place now,” the words of Jesus seem to Martha a polite sentiment that doesn’t cut the grief of the moment.

But Jesus goes on to proclaim, “I am the resurrection and the life” (verse 25). He places faith in himself at the center of the hope of resurrection, and he transforms that hope from a vague and future expectation to a present experience. Because Jesus is the resurrection, the one who believes in Jesus will live, even though he dies; and because Jesus is the life, the one who lives and believes in Jesus will never ultimately die. Resurrection and eternal life are the fruit of a relationship with Jesus; wherever Jesus is, there is life that never ends.

Reflection and discussion

- How was the two-day delay of Jesus an expression of his love? Have I ever experienced God’s delays as an expression of his love?

- When Jesus announced that he was going to Judea, Thomas replied, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (verse 16). Some commentators think that he was expressing courage and strong devotion; others think he expresses a skeptical realism about the fate that awaits them. Does Thomas seem to be sincere or sarcastic?

- How does Jesus deepen the faith of Martha by his statement: “I am the resurrection and the life”?

- What do I believe about the relationship of Jesus to my eternal destiny? How does faith in Jesus affect the quality of my life here and now?

Prayer

Jesus, you loved your friend Lazarus. Help me to experience your tender love for me, and comfort me with your assurance as I consider my own inevitable death. Help me to trust in you as the resurrection and the life.