

He stayed ... *that we might BELIEVE*

John 11:1-45

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Then Jesus said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead." For most of us that's the last word. There's nothing else to say. We silently turn, hugging our family or friends who are with us. We cry and walk out the door. The worst has happened. Lazarus is dead. In our modern world, the nurse can go home. The physician can return to his office. Medicines, IV.'s, oxygen and ministering hands are no longer needed.

There hadn't been a happier home in the little village of Bethany. They had everything a family could possibly need - a comfortable home and plenty of good food. More than that, they had a home whose doors were open to many friends. And there was love there. They loved each other, and they had a love for Jesus. A sure foundation for a happy home.

But Lazarus is dead. The head of the house, the protector, the beloved brother could no longer join in their laughter or share their tears. The home which once was among the happiest, is now filled with gloom, darkness, and despair. The light had gone out of their lives. Home can never be again what it once was.

How the hearts of these sisters must have been troubled, just as our own hearts are at times. To be so close to Jesus, and yet, to watch our loved one grow increasingly worse; to suffer so. Why was this tragedy allowed to take place? Why must Lazarus suffer? Why must death lay hold of him? Why must these sisters experience such heartbreak? Why must we? (Denzel Nonhof)

In the midst of the difficulties of life, our faith is often tested, and we wonder about God. We might know all about his love and care, but when things hit us personally is when we struggle. Does God really care? Is He really present? And our faith is tested like never before, again and again throughout life. And so it was for two sisters from Bethany.

The public ministry of Jesus is fast drawing to its close. (John 10:30-42) *"I and the Father are one." Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?" "We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God." ... Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp.*

Then Jesus went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days. Here he stayed 41 and many people came to him. They said, "Though John never performed a miraculous sign, all that John said about this man was true." And in that place many believed in Jesus.

Now John proceeds with the great events that mark the end of this period. First, the Raising of Lazarus. Then, the Royal Entry into Jerusalem.

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany. So his sisters sent to Jesus, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." A friend or loved one is ill and things are looking pretty serious. Their situation is deteriorating and getting worse. You know God can heal. He's done it before for others. And so, you ask Him to come and heal your dear one.

Jesus loved Lazarus and Mary and Marth, so what did He do? What would we *expect* Him to do? What would we *want* Him to do if we were in their situation? Come and heal Lazarus. Come and heal us. Heal our loved one. Jesus loved them. What else is He going to do? Not come? Jesus loves *us*. What else is He going to do? Not come? Not answer our prayer?

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Jesus stayed. He didn't go to them. He didn't heal Lazarus. Why? Why would He do that to them? Why would He do that to us? Jesus loved them, so He didn't come. He didn't heal. And in His delay, Lazarus died. Love doesn't always do what we want or expect. God doesn't always do what we want or expect. Jesus loved Mary and Martha, yet He stayed away from them in the hour of their greatest need.

God, in his infinite love and wisdom, sometimes delays to act, or refuses to act as we want him to. God *loves* you, therefore trouble comes to your house. God *loves* you, therefore He calls on you to gather to remember your loved one. Does that make sense to you? The goal of Jesus is not to make sense, but to bring you to *faith*. To believe

in Him. To trust Him. To believe He really knows what He's doing. That He really loves you, no matter what. Even when it seems He doesn't.

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."

After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

"Lord, if you'd been here!" We ask that same question today. In the hospital room. At the scene of the accident. At the funeral home. When we're all alone at night. "Lord, if you'd been here!" "Where were you, Lord?" "Why didn't you come?" "Why weren't you here for us, when we needed you the most!" "Don't you love us?"

Lord, if you'd been here, my husband would still be alive. Lord, if you'd been here, the shooter would have been stopped. Lord, if you'd been here, I wouldn't have been injured. Lord, if you'd been here, he would still be alive. Lord, why weren't you here? Why weren't you here for us, when we needed you the most!

Well, the truth is, He was. To be there in our greatest need is why there is a Jesus at all. It's why the Son of God came down from heaven. To be with us. To help us. To rescue us from sin and death. Because sin is the reason our loved ones get taken from us. It's not God's fault. It's sin's fault.

At the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus cried. Those tears *you* cry, He cries too. But while we're powerless to do anything about it, there is One who can. And He is there. And so, He speaks words of comfort to Mary and Martha. Words of comfort to you.

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

Martha knows about the resurrection. She's a good student of the Scriptures. But what she doesn't know yet, is that she won't have to wait. The last day, in a small way, will come to her. So Jesus says to her, *"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"* She said to him, *"Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."*

"I am the resurrection and the life." In other words, don't look to the last day for your hope. Look to Me for your hope. The resurrection isn't a thing or a day, but a Person. And where that Person is, where Jesus is, there is resurrection and there is life - even in a world buried under sin and death. And so with Jesus' coming, the end is already breaking into the here and now. The eternal is breaking into time. There is resurrection and there is life. (James Douthwaite)

"Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me."

When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

"This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." "Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe." Why was this tragedy allowed to take place? Why must Lazarus suffer? Why must death lay hold of him? Why must these sisters experience such heartbreak? Why must we?

Jesus did all of this - Jesus stayed away and allowed all the mourning and the tears and the pain and the misunderstanding - so that they might BELIEVE IN HIM. That *you* might believe in Him. *Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him,*

He stayed ... that we might believe. What if Jesus would have come to Lazarus right away, while he was still alive? People could say what? Jesus healed him. Or he got better on his own - Jesus had nothing to do with it. And no glory would have come to Jesus. No attention. No wonderment. No belief that He has the Son of God. Lazarus just got better on his own. No big deal. No reason to give anybody any credit. No reason to believe in Jesus.

But when Lazarus died, *now* what are you going to do? How's he going to recover from *this* one? How's he going to get better on his own? When there's a chance that Lazarus could have gotten better on his own, Jesus stays away. How long? Until nothing else can be done. Until all hope is gone. Lazarus isn't going to get better on his own. Jesus stays away until Lazarus is dead and no one can do a thing about it. He's not getting better. The only thing to be done is to lay his body in a tomb and mourn him. Weep that it's all over.

Then, when all hope is gone, Jesus shows up. Then the question is no longer "What can be done?", but "Do you believe?" The fourth Gospel has been called the book of Signs." John groups his account of Jesus' public ministry before the Passion around six great signs or miracles. Three of these were performed in Galilee: the turning of water into wine in chapter 2, the healing of the nobleman's son in chapter 4, and the feeding of the five thousand in chapter 6. Three were performed in Judea, the restoration of the sick at Bethesda, chapter 5, the healing of the man born blind, chapter 9, and the raising of Lazarus, chapter 11. Signs that seem to build and reach a great climax in the resurrection of Lazarus.

Of course, the *greatest* of Jesus' signs is his own death and resurrection, confirming him as the Savior of the world! John powerfully sums up the purpose of these "signs" in his book when he writes, "*Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that by believing you may have life in His name.*" (20:30-31)

Even though Jesus says that this event will have a happy ending (i.e., "this sickness will not end in death," vs. 4) this fact doesn't save Lazarus, Mary, Martha or even Jesus from experiencing pain and suffering. As the Apostle Paul puts it in 2 Cor 12:1-10, instead of protecting us from trials and suffering, God's work in our lives often brings us more deeply into an experience of them. In this too, is gift though, as we learn to rely on Jesus in the midst of our trials (2 Cor 12:9-10). (Brad Pribbenow)

From here on, the opposition to Jesus grows greater and more bitter. Therefore, His signs become more marvelous and reveal His majesty with an ever greater glory. There's a battle, as it were, between the light and the darkness. Jesus seeks to save His opponents, but they despise and repudiate Him.

This text appears less than half way through John's Gospel, but records events which take place merely days before Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. John Chapter 11 forms the transition to the story of the Passion.

For His great miracle in this chapter, furnishes an opportunity for the most violent outbreak on the part of the adversaries, with the result that they decide to take His life. (Ylvisaker)

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." ... So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.

In this life, we will all experience deep heartache. We will be separated from those closest to us. Tragedy and death will come to each one of our families, and our homes will never be the same. But there's something more precious than even life itself. More precious than preserving life are events which bring us to *believe* in Jesus Christ, the Resurrection and the Life.