

Jesus's Gift to Lazarus

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John 11:1–45 (NRSVUE)

Today's scripture lesson from the Gospel of John was only supposed to go through verse 45, which would've had it end on a happy note. Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead. He has his friend back, and Martha and Mary have their brother back. Let the good times roll.

Unfortunately, I am going to have to burst this happy bubble. In a little while, I am going to read you the final nine verses from 45-54, so you can see why this story is so important for us. It will help us understand who Jesus was and how this one event put into motion his final week before his crucifixion.

I also think that this story helps us to begin to think about resurrection. Yes, Jesus physically raised Lazarus from death. He did so four days after Lazarus's death, and as Martha warned him, "There will be a stench because he has been dead for four days." It was believed that the soul left the body after three days, so Lazarus was really and truly dead.

What do we know about Lazarus? We know that Jesus was already good friends with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. So why didn't Jesus leave immediately when Mary asked him to, instead of waiting two days before leaving to help Lazarus? First, because Martha and Mary did not tell him that Lazarus was dying, just that he was ill. Jesus did not see this as urgent.

Second, Bethany, where Lazarus lived, was very close to Jerusalem, where the Jewish leaders had threatened to stone Jesus to death. Lynne talked about this in last week's message. Going to Bethany was a real physical risk for Jesus. We know that just before the raising of Lazarus, Jesus had safely traveled to the Jordan River and escaped his would-be executioners. Why risk going to Bethany, so close to Jerusalem, if Lazarus was just ill? I suspect that Jesus knew he needed to wait in order to set in motion the events that would follow. Remember, Jesus 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" (John 11:4).

Here's John 11:45–54, the final verses of this story:

But some of [the Jews] went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You

know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

That is a bit different from the so-called happy ending had we stopped reading at verse 45. John tells us that raising Lazarus is what sealed Jesus’s fate. It wasn’t the trial, or folks handing him over to the authorities, or Peter denying him, or Judas betraying him. These were important factors, but what really got the process rolling is when Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. I contend again that Jesus knew that this would be the act that would ultimately end his life.

Prior to this, Jesus had done some pretty miraculous things. He had changed water into wine at the wedding in Cana. He had healed the royal official’s son in Capernaum and the paralyzed man in Bethesda. He had fed five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish. He had walked on water. He had given sight to a man who had been blind since birth.

His final big act was to raise Lazarus from the dead. People were already talking about the miracles they had seen, and the Jewish authorities were getting more nervous. They had wanted to kill him after his third miracle because, as John explains in 5:18, “He was not only breaking the sabbath but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.” Jesus didn’t slow down performing his miracles despite the danger. In fact, he ratcheted things up, culminating in the raising of Lazarus. It’s almost as if Jesus looked the authorities in the eyes and said, “If you were threatened by what I did before, just watch this!” He stared down fear and death and said, “Your scare tactics won’t stop me.”

So Jesus finally decided to go to Bethany at great risk to himself. He had a conversation with his disciples, who tried to talk him out of it. He knew Lazarus had died and he would use his resurrection so that people would know that he was indeed the son of God. Jesus’s disciple Thomas said in John 11:16, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” Thomas wasn’t talking about Lazarus; he was talking about dying with Jesus. Thomas has a bad rap for being doubtful, but in that moment, he got it. He got that Jesus’s raising of Lazarus would speed up his own death, and Thomas was willing to die with him.

But let’s not forget that Jesus was in his human form. He must have felt all the human emotions that we would experience under those circumstances—great fear and trepidation, sorrow and anger. He knew that by raising his friend, he would die. But again, as John reminds us in 15:13, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Is this not also a

foreshadowing of his own death and resurrection? I frankly cannot imagine the kind of courage it must have taken to set these events in motion, knowing full well what would happen.

I have admitted to you all that I struggle with the idea of physical resurrection, but that does not mean that I don't believe in resurrection. I have been resurrected many times in my life, as have we all. Here is Webster's Dictionary's second definition of the word *resurrection*: "the act or fact of rising again from an inferior state (as death, decay, disuse) into a superior." Thinking of the word *resurrection* from this perspective sheds a whole new light on how we have all experienced resurrection in our lives. Have you healed from an illness or injury? Have you struggled with loss and heartache, but ended up stronger as a result of your pain? Have you been hurt emotionally by someone you love, but learned to forgive and heal from that hurt? Have you fallen in love? Have you played with a joyful child? Anything that helps you rise into a superior state is a form of resurrection. I maintain that we often experience some form of resurrection every day.

Let us also think about this sacrifice that Jesus made. Would we, as followers of Christ, be willing to give our life for a friend? Would we have the courage, the tenacity, to set into motion a series of events that would seal our fate?

We often hear about the joys and burdens of discipleship. This story really spells it out in very real terms. Thankfully most of us do not have to make these life and death decisions, but we do get to choose what kind of follower of Jesus we want to be. We are given so many chances in our lives to make hard decisions, to do the right thing, to be resurrected into a superior state. The more often we make that choice, the more enriched our lives will become and the closer we will be to Jesus. Jesus did this for us, so that we will have life full of resurrections. Let us all give great thanks to Jesus for this gift of life and love.