

“Whatever Happened to Lazarus”
March 5, 2023

John 11:38-44

We know what actually happened to Lazarus. At least according to the Gospel of John, we know. We know Lazarus died an untimely death. If Lazarus was a close friend of Jesus, that probably put him in his early thirties. We know that Jesus never made it to visit Lazarus while he was deathly ill, despite the fact that Mary and Martha, Lazarus’ sisters, both urged Jesus to come before it was too late.

We know that by the time Jesus finally arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been dead for four days. Which was a significant number of days because Jews in the ancient world believed that a person’s soul hovered over a person’s dead body for three days before the soul officially left their body on the fourth day. In other words, by the time Jesus appeared on the scene, Lazarus was, by any account, completely dead.

We know that Jesus was emotional in this morning’s story. In one spot in the story, the Gospel writer describes Jesus as “greatly disturbed in spirit.” A couple of verses later, Jesus wept alongside Mary and Martha. For Jesus in today’s story, anger and tears were all mixed together, as they so often are when it comes to life and death.

There was sadness for Jesus that his good friend died. And sadness that Mary and Martha and the gathered community were so upset. At the same time, there was anger for Jesus because no one realized or understood he had the power to raise Lazarus from the dead. And anger, perhaps, that this was yet another case of Jesus carrying the lonely weight of the world on his shoulders.

Finally, we know that Jesus commanded the stone to be rolled away from the front of the tomb. We know that Jesus called Lazarus by name to rise up and walk out of the tomb’s mouth. And we know that when Lazarus emerged from the tomb, Jesus urged the onlookers to remove the cloth bandages from Lazarus so that he looked less like a mummy and more like a human being.

In a nutshell, that’s what we know about Lazarus. On the receiving end of the greatest miracle Jesus performed during his lifetime, Lazarus is literally dragged out from the dark shadow of death and into the bright light of day. And that’s the last we ever hear from Lazarus. Actually, we can’t even say that because Lazarus emerges from the tomb as a living, breathing human being and he never says anything. No comment, no real time reaction, no quick interview...Lazarus simply disappears.

Well maybe it’s just me, but for all I know about what happened to Lazarus when he died, I would also love to know what happened to Lazarus after the fateful day Jesus brought him back to life. Where did Lazarus go? What did he do? How did Lazarus live after Jesus gave him the ultimate second chance?

In my imagination, the tale of whatever happened to Lazarus unfolded in one of two ways...

Version one. When Lazarus heard the muffled voice of Jesus urging him to come forth, Lazarus stood up, his joints stiff and muscles atrophied from lack of use. Light pierced through the opening in the tomb where the rock had been and when Lazarus stepped out, the sun momentarily blinded him.

First, Lazarus heard the collective gasp of the crowd. Soon he recognized smiles on the faces of his two sisters. And then Jesus reached out to Lazarus asking if Lazarus was hungry.

A few days later, the trouble began. Jesus left Bethany to return to his previous travel itinerary and Lazarus went home. That same day, a man from the temple knocked on Lazarus' door, demanding that Lazarus show his face. In fact, the man from the temple kept on showing up, day after day, asking the same questions. Trying to determine whether Lazarus was really alive. And why? And how did Jesus do it? Or whether the whole thing was a hoax. Fake news. Some elaborate conspiracy.

Lazarus didn't have any answers to offer the temple representative beyond basic facts. Mainly because Jesus never told Lazarus why he brought Lazarus back to life. As a result, Lazarus couldn't give the man from the temple the information he wanted.

The skepticism and suspicion with which the man from the temple treated Lazarus soon rubbed off on friends and neighbors. When the neighbors saw one another they eventually got around to gossip. What was so special about Lazarus that he deserved a miracle? It was even worse when neighbors lost family members and friends to death and those loved ones didn't come back from the dead. The fact that Lazarus was alive fueled growing resentment among those who questioned his unprecedented good fortune..

Over time, Mary and Martha grew older, each of them facing their own health struggles. Meanwhile, Lazarus kept on living. Sometimes, like a spectacle in a circus sideshow, people would stop by looking for "the risen man" they had heard stories about. And Lazarus would do his best to politely oblige their curiosity.

But when Lazarus laid awake at night, he himself wondered why Jesus had done it. Death was peaceful and comfortable with no regrets and no hassle. On the other hand, coming back to life meant bearing the burden of watching family and friends suffer and die while Lazarus lived with no firm expiration date.

Nothing was ever clear to Lazarus after he emerged from the tomb. There was no certainty, no solid ground, nothing he could count on. In truth, Lazarus lived the remainder of his life after death wishing Jesus had simply left him alone in the tomb that day. And Lazarus yearned in his daily prayers to experience the sweet embrace of death once more...

Or could it be that the story of whatever happened to Lazarus went like this...

Version two. When Jesus finally arrived in Bethany after four days, he went to the tomb and stood there staring at the stone that blocked the entrance. Jesus stared so long, in truth, that he looked as though he was in some kind of trance. And then Jesus began to tremble and shake. Almost as if Jesus was planning to move the stone away by sheer force of will. Or by some kind of supernatural telekinesis.

By the time Jesus opened his mouth, everyone nearby heard him bellow out his command. "Lazarus, come out!" And no one heard it more loudly than Lazarus through the open space where the stone had been pushed over to the side.

The tension in the air was electric. And people who were watching held their breath. Until they heard a moaning sound from inside the tomb. The slow, agonizing, faintly familiar sound of a man four days dead beginning to rise up to his feet.

When Lazarus finally stumbled over to the entrance of the tomb, he looked a frightening mess. But the moment Jesus told the crowd to unbind Lazarus, the crowd stopped being nervous. And they did as Jesus instructed, unraveling every bandage until Lazarus was free.

Meanwhile, Lazarus remembered vividly the moment in his dying where he saw the light waiting for him on the other side. And the gentle hand that beckoned to him, inviting him to God's presence. Lazarus would be the first one to admit how reluctant he was to turn back from that light.

But when Lazarus heard the voice of Jesus calling him to come forth. And when he stood up. And when he lumbered out of the tomb. When Lazarus opened his eyes, he saw Jesus standing in front of him in broad daylight. And Lazarus could not tell in that instant whether he was in the company of Jesus in the eternal world. Or whether he was looking at Jesus in the flesh back on earth.

Lazarus went on to live a fairly normal life before he died a second time some years later. This time for good. But during that period when Lazarus lived his second chapter, people would come up to Lazarus from time to time and ask him about that amazing day.

Lazarus didn't mind retelling the story. Usually, however, it wasn't necessary to go into detail. The moment people took one look at Lazarus, they understood. From that miraculous day on, Lazarus had the light of Christ shining forth from him in everything he said or did. The Christ light in Lazarus was so strong and bright and clear, in fact, that the people who knew Jesus Christ recognized exactly where it came from...

Whatever happened to Lazarus? I wonder which version of the story? What do you think...?

