



The Church of England
in Essex and East London
Diocese of Chelmsford

Resurrection Journeys

Session 5: Awareness of grace; kindness

The Death of Lazarus

John 11

‘This illness does not lead to death,’ said Jesus when he heard of Lazarus’s sickness. And he stayed another two days ‘in the place where he was’ rather than hurrying to see Lazarus and his sisters in Bethany.

Two days later, it seems as if he has changed his mind. ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep’, he says to the disciples – and when they seem confused, he puts it in plain words: ‘Lazarus is dead.’ And then he says, ‘Let us go to him’.

It is at this point that we realise that Jesus himself, if he goes to Bethany, is in danger of being killed. Even though his decision to stay away is picked out as odd by John, the narrator of the story – he stays away ‘even though’ he loves Lazarus and his sisters – as soon as he decides to go there, at a point where it seems it’s just too late, his disciples are frightened for him. ‘Let us also go’, says Thomas, ‘that we may die with him’.

The living Jesus, the dead Lazarus – in this story they mirror each other, the living man facing towards death; the dead man raised to life: ‘Lazarus, come out!’ Lazarus emerges from the tomb, still wrapped in his grave clothes, blinded by the cloth around his head: life swathed in death’s trappings.

In between Lazarus’s death, in that place distant from where Jesus was, and his emergence into life at Jesus’s command, Jesus grieved. He wept;

and as he approached the tomb John tells us he was ‘greatly disturbed in spirit’. This man, who has declared himself to be ‘the resurrection and the life’, is facing the terrors of death and loss. It is as if the weeping he sees among Lazarus’s family, friends and neighbours, pile onto him the weight of human grief – the burden of mortality that sees in the death of a loved person, a mirror of all the losses they will ever bear, finishing in the loss of all things; for the one who grieves will also die.

Jesus never wavers in his trust in God’s lifegiving presence. He walks within it; it makes up his own essence. But alongside that pure faith and intimacy with God, Jesus carries our burdens too: of loss, of grief, of the terrors of death that confront every human soul. The one who faces death finds also the grace, the courage and the sheer kindness – for Jesus loves this family; they are his friends – to affirm God’s resurrection life.

Jesus has begun his journey towards death. Thomas is not wrong about that. He has chosen to be a life-bringer for his friend; to make Lazarus’s resurrection journey the first step of his own journey towards the cross. He has brought life and breath into the dangerous valley of bones and corruption. He has wept for love, and at the same time exulted in his witness to God’s life-giving glory.

Lazarus emerges into freedom through Jesus’s words of liberation: ‘unbind him and let him go’. His resurrection journey has just begun. In this place of a tomb, he and Jesus cross paths on Jesus’s own passion journey, watered with tears, yet bright with glory. In our own valleys of tears, that glory shines behind the hills and in the water; for like Lazarus our mortal journeys are journeys that walk the way of God’s everlasting life.

Amen.

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