

It's Time to Get Up!

BY TERRY T. LESTER

The raising of Lazarus is a preview that prompts us to trust and to glorify God. For in a few short days Jesus too will face his dying and death. But on Easter morn the voice of God echoes into the mystery and darkness of death, "It's time to get up!" And Jesus, the risen Christ, comes forth!

When I was a child my mother would call to my brother and me in the morning, "Boys, it's time to get up!" And if we didn't get up when this voice alarm sounded, my Daddy would come, with shaving brush in hand, and brush our faces with shaving cream! It was definitely time to get up.

When our boys were small, my wife Jan and I would sing to them on Sunday mornings a silly chorus we composed, "Wake up, it's time to go to Sunday School. Wake up, it's time to go to Sunday School."

In the eleventh chapter of John's Gospel we hear a clear call to get up, but the voice that calls is rousing more than the sleep rhythms of the night. The voice pierces through the shrouded darkness and deep sleep of death. This Gospel story, which some consider to be almost parabolic, begins with Jesus receiving an urgent message about his good friend Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. The word from Bethany is simply "Lord, he whom you love is ill" (John 11:3b).

This is an all too familiar message in most of our lives and families, "the one who you love is ill." Being in human skin means we are vulnerable to myriad diseases and conditions that produce suffering. It was Good Friday when our family gathered with my father-in-law in the oncologist's office. We heard the distressing news that his blood cancer was terminal and he had only a short time to live. Following this

dire prognosis, the oncologist Dr. Hicks, the son of my seminary professor, Dr. Bryant Hicks, joined hands with us as he led a beautiful prayer affirming our faith and hope in Christ in the face of dying and death. Cancer, heart attacks, strokes, Alzheimer's – many catastrophic diseases threaten our loved ones' lives.

All of us will eventually surrender to the sleep of death, even if it is from old age. This month I celebrated my sixtieth birthday. Sixty is not old, but it is sure not young! Wendell Berry muses in his poem, *Seventy Years*, "Well, anyhow, I am not going to die young." My mother will turn eighty next month and she is dreading this milestone. We Baby Boomers remember the Steve Miller Band singing, "Time keeps on slippin', slippin' into the future," and it is true.



When Jesus receives the news about Lazarus's illness, he offers a surprising prognosis, "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" (11:4). Jesus divinely knows something beyond mere human knowledge. And John, the Gospel writer, also wants us to unequivocally know, "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (11:5). It is a bit puzzling that in spite of Jesus' deep love for this family, he does not immediately drop everything he is doing to go and see ailing Lazarus. His timing appears off, for what could be more important than to attend to the needs of a sick friend?

In his time Jesus says to his disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples remind him that there are people in Judea who want to kill him, so they ask "are you going there again?" Sometimes death is not by natural causes, accidents, or old age, but from tragic acts of violence and war.

Every day I drive past Sgt. Chris Hamlin Memorial Lane on Highway 229. I visited with Chris at our church recreation center shortly before his deployment to Iraq. We spoke of serious matters pertaining to life and death and faith. Chris assured me of his preparedness to enter into harm's way. Tragically, this young man's life was cut short by the ravages of the war in Iraq. For Jesus, to go to Jerusalem is to enter harm's way and to face dying and death. Even Thomas, the Doubter, has no doubts about this solemn reality for he says to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (11:16). The noted psychologist Rollo May (1909-1994) once noted, "Commitment is healthiest when it is not *without* doubt but *in spite of* doubt."[†]

"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to awaken him," Jesus explains (11:11). The disciples think he is speaking literally: "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right" (11:12). But Jesus

clarifies, “Lazarus is dead” (11:13). In fact, by the time Jesus arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has been dead for four days and many mourners have gathered at Mary and Martha’s house to grieve.

Martha greets Jesus with a bittersweet affirmation, “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died” (11:21). The power of God present in Jesus is not limited by time and space – he healed the centurion’s servant at a distance (Matthew 8:5-13; cf. Luke 7:2-10). But Jesus did not stop Lazarus’s dying any more than he stops our dying. Knowing Jesus is not a shield against death. Our faith does not protect us from the unavoidable and inevitable. As he promised, Jesus is with us always, but his presence is no hedge against our dying.



But now John’s story takes us to another place, to another dimension. For in “the valley of the shadow,” in the throes of grief and loss, Jesus speaks death-defying words: “Your brother will rise again” (11:23). Martha thinks Jesus is speaking of a long-distant resurrection, on “the last day,” but Jesus amplifies, “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. Do you believe this?” (11:25-26) And Martha confesses a faith she does not fully understand, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world” (11:27).

What follows defies human explanation or understanding; it takes us to the place of faith. Jesus makes his way to Lazarus’s tomb, where he hears a similarly disappointed word from Martha’s weeping sister, Mary: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (11:32b). In this moment of terrible loss, we see another glimpse of Jesus’ compassionate heart. For when Jesus sees all the grieving people, he is “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” (11:33b). What children learn in Sunday School is the shortest verse in the Bible, speaks succinctly to Jesus’ humanity and identity with our grief: “Jesus wept” (11:34, KJV). Jesus, the very Son of God who merely spoke to calm the storms, weeps unashamedly, unapologetically. He is as Isaiah prophesied, “A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3a, KJV). People who see Jesus weeping remark “See how he loved him!” but some could not keep from wondering “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (John 11:36-37) Death often leaves us with unanswered questions.

In spite of his love for Lazarus, Jesus does not prevent his good friend from dying. He experiences the same painful emotions of grief and loss that accompany us on every trip to the cemetery with a departed loved one. But on this day something extraordinary takes place. Jesus,

who is the resurrection and the life, asks for the stone covering the entrance of Lazarus's tomb to be removed. Martha, who is not at all comfortable with what Jesus is doing, reminds him of the four days that have elapsed since her brother's death and the inevitable decay of the body that has begun. But Jesus reminds Martha of what he said earlier, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" (11:40) So the stone is removed.

Jesus prays to the Father, who always hears, that people will indeed believe that he has been sent by the Father to this grieving, dying world. Then he cries out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" (11:43) It's time to get up!

John gives the result of this wake-up call: "The dead man came out" (11:44a).



The raising of Lazarus is more than just another miracle story of Jesus. It is a preview of things to come that prompts us to trust and to glorify God. For in a few short days Jesus too will face his dying and death. His flesh, like ours, will meet its end. Like Lazarus, Jesus's lifeless body will be taken to a cemetery and placed in a tomb. But on Easter morn the voice of God echoes into the mystery and darkness of death, "It's time to get up!" And Jesus, the risen Christ, comes forth!

Following our visit to my father-in-law's oncologist on Good Friday, our family gathered at his house on Easter Sunday afternoon. We took turns holding his hand and expressing our love to "Grandbuddy." That night he was troubled for a while, though eventually a sense of peace stilled his suffering body. Shortly before midnight, he closed his eyes and slowly drifted into the sleep of death. Our hearts were broken and we still miss him, but we believe with all our hearts that God, who is the "resurrection and the life," called to Jan's Dad, and will one day call to all of us who have ears to hear, "It's time to get up!"

John's story about Lazarus's dying and death now takes us to another dimension. For in "the valley of the shadow," in the throes of grief and loss, Jesus speaks these death-defying words to Martha: "Your brother will rise again."

An ancient Christian hymn echoes this call to the Church. Glory to God!

Sleeper, awake!
Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.

Ephesians 5:24b

NOTE

† Rollo May, *The Courage to Create* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975), 21.



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