

Dead Man Walking

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a three-part series

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John 11:1-7, 17-27, 33-44 (NIV2011)

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, ⁷ and then he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.”

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

²¹ “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

²⁴ Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

²⁷ “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ “Where have you laid him?” he asked.

“Come and see, Lord,” they replied.

³⁵ Jesus wept.

³⁶ Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”

³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ “Take away the stone,” he said.

“But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”

⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”

⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

How could we make sense of a dead man walking? What could it mean? If it is a signpost of sorts, to what is it pointing?

Like most men, I am loathe to ask for directions. Thus, I like signs that point me in the right direction. Big, clear, well-lit, impossible-to-miss signs. The Bible is full such signposts, guiding the reader toward a deeper appreciation and understanding of God’s work in our world.

Today’s story is just such a sign. It is a big, amazing story in itself, but it points ahead to something even bigger, even more amazing.

The death of Lazarus

Jesus and his disciples have gone to the eastern side of the Jordan River, to an area known as Batanea¹ (John 10:40-42). It is about four days from the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, in Bethany, a town very near Jerusalem. The family is very close with Jesus and he loved them.

Jesus receives a message from the sisters that Lazarus has fallen seriously ill. When Jesus gets the message, he says to those around him that Lazarus will not die. This event too, will work for the glorification of God and God's son.

Jesus does not yet leave for Bethany and a couple of days later he learns, by seemingly supernatural insight, that Lazarus has died. But Jesus tells his disciples that they can set out for Bethany so that Jesus can wake Lazarus up. It will be a journey of several days.²

When they arrive, Jesus is met by Martha, who expresses her regret that Jesus had not been there when her brother had died, for she believes that Jesus would have cured him and, even now, she places her hope in Jesus and the unique relationship he has with the Father.

When Jesus says to her, "Your brother will rise again," Martha naturally assumes that Jesus is speaking of the great resurrection of the dead that will happen when the Day of the Lord arrives. But then Jesus takes her to a place she never would have suspected, saying to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die" (v. 25-26). When he asks her if she really does have faith in him, she confesses her confidence that Jesus is "Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

When Jesus makes this astounding claim, "I am the resurrection and the life," he is making three points. First, this is one of seven "I am" statements in the gospel. By invoking the name of God given to Moses at the burning bush, "I am," Jesus is making a dramatic claim as to his true identity. In the next two claims (in verses 25b and 26a) Jesus makes clear that he isn't using "resurrection" and "life" as synonyms for emphasis. Gail O'Day helps us to see this "hinge point," as she calls it. "Resurrection" and "life" refer to the two phrases that immediately follow in 25b and 26a:

the one who believes in me and dies → yet lives [resurrection]

the one who lives and believes in me → never dies [life]

The first phrase speaks to our new life after our death (the future). The second phrase speaks to our life in Christ now.

Dead man walking

As Jesus speaks to Martha, he spends time comforting Mary and all those who loved Lazarus. They weep and Jesus weeps as they come to the tomb where Lazarus body was laid out, as was the Jewish burial custom at the time.³

¹Recent research suggests that the "Bethany" of John 1:28 and alluded to in 10:40-42 is not the "Bethany" located less than two miles from Jerusalem. Place names and especially their spellings were much more fluid in the ancient world than in our own. For more on this see D. A. Carson's commentary on John in the *Pillar New Testament Commentary* series.

²The four days is important. We know, from a rabbinical commentary called *Leviticus Rabbah*, that by a slightly later date, there was a rabbinic belief that after a person seemed dead to all observers, the soul hovered around for three days, waiting to depart until decomposition began. At that point, death was certain. If this was a belief held by any Jews in Jesus' day or even amongst John's readers, the four days makes it clear that Lazarus is dead, dead, and dead! For more on this, see Carson's commentary. Given the difficulties of ascertaining genuine death in the ancient world, this isn't as crazy a way to think about it as it might seem.

³The body would be laid in a tomb, wrapped in burial cloths, and left until the flesh had decomposed, leaving only the bones. The family would then collect the bones and put them in an ossuary, a bone box.

Jesus then asks that the round stone blocking the entrance to the tomb be rolled away. Martha, the ever-practical sister, points out that the odor of Lazarus' decaying body will be awful. He has been dead four days, after all. But Jesus reminds her to have faith; she is about to behold the glory of God.

Jesus then raises his voice to the Father and prays aloud so that all those gathered around can hear. Then, in the still silence, Jesus yells out "Lazarus, come out!"

And he did.

The resuscitation of Lazarus, bringing him back to life, is a signpost to Jesus' resurrection, but only that and no more. Lazarus' raising was a powerful witness to the power and the glory of God, but its deeper meaning lies in what it pointed to, Jesus' resurrection and the arrival of God's kingdom. The text box below will help you see that Lazarus was only resuscitated, not resurrected.

It is Jesus who *is* the resurrection and the life, the embodiment of the promise that though we will die, we will yet live, that our death is not our end. This is the promise that one day we will be resurrected just as Jesus was resurrected. We affirm this promise every time we recite the Apostles' Creed, asserting our belief in "the resurrection of the body."

The promise of resurrection speaks to the life that will be ours, but when Jesus also says, "I am . . . the life," he speaks to our life with God now. As hard as it may be to grasp and truly believe, God's victory over sin and death is already ours. As Jesus puts it, the one who lives and believes in him never dies. In the glories of God's great and wonderful mysteries, the defeat of death is not merely a promise, it is a present reality. When we come to faith in Christ, we step into the eternity that is life with God.

Resurrected or Resuscitated?

Sometimes people mistakenly think of Jesus' resurrection as merely some sort of resuscitation. But it was not. Jesus wasn't brought back from death to life, but passed through death to life-after-death and then to the embodied life *after* life-after-death.

But when Jesus brought Lazarus back to life (John 11), it was a "resuscitation," not a resurrection. Lazarus was brought back to life as he had known it and went on to die just like everyone else. In contrast, Jesus was not restored to the life and to the body he had known before his death. Rather, Jesus passed through death to new life and a new physicality. Jesus no longer had a "soulish" body (*soma psychikon* in the original Greek), such as we all do now, but a "Spirit-filled body" (*soma pneumatikon*, see 1 Cor 15:44), just as we all will one day.

Here's an analogy that might help. Lazarus' raising was akin to someone who dies on the operating table but then is brought back to life. That person hasn't defeated death, just merely been brought back and will have to face death a second time. Jesus, on the other hand, dies on the cross, goes from death to a life-after-death and, finally, to the "life after life-after-death" of resurrection. Jesus' resurrection represented a victory over death that Lazarus' resuscitation did not, though it is a foreshadowing of the real thing. The story of Lazarus is that signpost pointing ahead to real thing – Easter morning.

In their stories about the risen Christ, the Gospel writers don't try to explain all this, they simply tell what happened. Jesus was recognizable, though his appearance was slightly altered. He ate, but seemed to be appear inside a locked and unopened door. When we recite the Apostles Creed, proclaiming the "resurrection of the body," we look forward to the day when we too, like Jesus, will receive a transformed and glorified, yet physical, body.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Our Connection Groups have been watching segments of the film, *The Gospel of John*, each week. Chapter 11 of John's gospel begins at 1:30:31 the film and ends at 1:40:46.

1. In her commentary on John's story of Lazarus, Gail O'Day suggests that we must acknowledge the question on many readers' minds – Did this really happen? Do you think it did? If not, how would you reconcile belief in Jesus' resurrection with the denial of the claims about Lazarus? If you do believe it happened, what would you say to someone who believes that such a thing is impossible? Do you think that one could credibly believe in Jesus' resurrection and yet deny the raising of Lazarus?
2. We don't much like to talk about death, though it is an ever-present reality. Every day is lived in the face of death. Today's story is centered on death. Perhaps that is why it also contains the strongest statements in the gospel about what Jesus means for our lives now. Read again verses 25-26. How would you put these in your own words? What do they say about your life today and tomorrow? What do they say about your death?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, 2 Kings 4:8-37 God, through Elisha, resuscitates a young boy who has died.	Tuesday, Mark 5:21-43 Jesus restores life to a young girl.
Wednesday, Acts 10:32-43 God, through Peter, restores life to Tabitha.	Thursday, Acts 20:7-12 God, through Paul, restores life to a young man.
Friday, John 11:45-57 The raising of Lazarus draws so much attention that his life is threatened by the authorities.	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands in its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying the Gospel of John

We meet from 11:45 to 1:00 in room 127 on Tuesdays.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Paul and the Galatians

We meet from 6:45 to 8:00 in Piro Hall on Monday evenings.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages. The class is usually led by Dr. Scott Engle and is organized into series.

The current series:

The Vampire Defanged:

How the embodiment of sin and evil became a romantic hero

On April 1, Palm Sunday

From Palms to Politics:

The True Story of Jesus' Last Week

Coming in April

What the Bible Really Says About the Endtimes