

Via Dolorosa: Take Away the Stone

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John 11:28-44

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When I was in Junior High, my Sunday School teacher had a contest to see how many scripture verses we could memorize. I'm sure many of you remember having to recite memory verses in churches while growing up. As kids, being told to memorize a verse invariably prompted the same question: Which is the shortest verse in the bible? Answer: **John 11:35** – Jesus wept. Two words in the King James Version, now expanded to four words in the New Revised Standard Version – Jesus began to weep. But why did Jesus weep? That's a more difficult question. So let's first set the scene.

Martha, Mary and Lazarus lived in Bethany, not too far from the capital city of Jerusalem. Their home was a place of welcome hospitality whenever Jesus passed through the region. In John 10, we're told about a visit Jesus made to Jerusalem that took an ugly turn, when he was accused of blasphemy for daring to suggest that he and God the Father were one. The mob wanted to stone him, but Jesus escaped and left that region. While he was away, news reached him that Lazarus was dying. Although it was risky to return to that area, Jesus traveled back to Bethany and met up with the sisters Martha and Mary in the cemetery where Lazarus had recently been buried.

When Mary saw Jesus, she fell at his feet grief-stricken and weeping. Both she and her sister Martha said the same thing to him: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw Lazarus' tomb, he began to weep. That's a powerful image. It reminds us of the humanity of Christ, how he felt all the same things we feel – hunger, pain, longing, and grief to the point of weeping. Pope Leo I, back in the 5th century, used to point to this passage when discussing the two natures of Jesus, saying "In his humanity Jesus wept for Lazarus; in his divinity he raised him from the dead."

But there was more to those tears than just an expression of grief. **Vs. 33** – "When Jesus saw Mary weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." The Greek words for that last phrase are rarely used in scripture. They refer to be deeply agitated, knotted up with frustration, emotion, and righteous anger. There in Bethany, surrounded by friends and disciples, Jesus witnessed people torn up about the power of death over life, walking about as if covered by a funeral pall that weighed them down every day of their lives. Even when Jesus told Martha point blank, "I am the resurrection and the life; those who believe in me, even though they die, will live" (Jn 11:25), I'm not sure she truly believed him. I'm not sure any of them truly believed. And that's partly why Jesus wept. Given what happened next, his tears were likely justified.

Jesus approached Lazarus' tomb, a cave sealed by a great rock, and said to the mourners, "Take away the stone." Imagine the horror that swept through the crowd at this socially repugnant idea. He was asking them to disturb a fresh grave, to expose a decaying corpse to the elements again. Martha tensed up and whispered, "No, Lord, there will be a stench; he's been dead for four days. It would be unpleasant – no, painful to see him again. Please, Lord, keep the stone where it is."

Gracia Grindal is a professor at Luther Seminary and has said, "Sometimes people fear resurrection more than they fear death."¹ (Have you ever feared resurrection more than death?) Grindal goes on to say, "Finality has a certain comfort; at least we know what to do. But resurrection change will be frightening to those intent on being their own lord," intent on doing things their own way. Jesus strides into the graveyards of our lives and points at those things we'd prefer stay buried and says "Take away the stone." We'd figured out how to live with secrets hidden behind stones, with lost hopes and former dreams buried away, with broken family relationships or memories of abuse or secret addictions or repressed anger all buried and hidden behind stones. There's a cold comfort in the finality that says these things are over and done with, dead and gone. That's what we tell ourselves, at least. But we all know that the past is never truly past. Those who die never fully leave us. That which we repress and bury away is never truly gone.

When we have Holy Ground prayer services, healing services, or times of anointing, some people ask for prayers for literal healing from disease and illness. But many people pray for healing of a spiritual kind – to heal broken relationships, to be able to forgive others, let go of grudges, learn to trust again. The miracle in John's gospel isn't about one man being resuscitated back to life. It's about an entire family being resurrected, an entire community (including us) restored to life and hope and faith. To all who would fear resurrection more than death, Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Take away the stone. Trust in me, my love, my power, my grace. Remove those stones so my light can shine into your dark tombs of spiritual death, anger and brokenness. Whatever ugliness resides therein cannot be healed until it comes into my light, until its stench is blown away by my "pneuma," my spirit." Wherever we've erected a personal cemetery, in the shadows of our heart, in our bedrooms or business boardrooms or in military command posts or homeless shelters, Jesus' response is the same: Take away the stone." A thousand Marthas, including most of us, may well shout, "Oh no you don't" but Jesus says his command all the same. Why? Because he is the Lord of life, not the preserver of death.

After offering a prayer, Jesus issued his second command, shouting "Lazarus, come out!" In Greek, it's even more emphatic – just two words: Lazarus, outside! And then the words that come next should be a memory verse for us all. **Vs. 44:** The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." In every miracle there is always a touch of the mundane. Lazarus walks out of the tomb, alive again, but still wrapped in burial cloths and adorned with the ribbons of death. His face was still covered so he couldn't see. Shuffling out, likely teetering and tottering like an old man in dire need of a walker,

Lazarus emerged into the light. The verdict was still out on whether this was a good idea or not. No one went rushing forward. I imagine a very pregnant pause in the dramatic action as everyone tried to comprehend what they were seeing. So what does Jesus do? He does what he always does. He turns to us. To be a follower of Jesus does not mean we're passive onlookers watching the parade of life pass by. We're not couch potatoes sitting in recliners and spending our days scratching our spiritual lottery tickets hoping a heavenly payoff just falls into our laps. No, Jesus – the one who shouted and prayed now turns to us and says, "Unbind him, you and you and you and let him go. You do it." Richard Rohr, in his book *Radical Grace*, has written, "Though Jesus brings us to life, he needs us...to unbind Lazarus. [For] we now share in the power of resurrection. That is the meaning of Church, our call, our burden, our task in human history."

Imagine what it must feel like to unwrap cloths from one you'd buried only a few days before, to remove the clothing of cadavers and welcome a loved one back to life. What it is like to peel back bandages and see healed flesh. To remove blinders and see eyes that now gaze back at you. What it is like to hold hands again in love after they'd been pulled out of our grasp in anger or resentment. What it is like to embrace again after our arms had been left empty through distance or distrust. What it is like to step out of chains of addictions, burial cloths of depression, tombs of despair. Christ knows. Christ knows how wonderful it is and he wept, because such joy and peace was never meant to be reserved for him alone.

And Christ still shouts. Christ's voice challenges every cemetery stone and stony hearted soul. Christ's voice challenges all darkness, all falsehood, all violence, abandonment and despair. You're why Christ raised Lazarus from the dead. There are scores of burial cloths to be unbound all around you, right here in this place. Tears of grief poised to become tears of joy. We unbind others as we are unbound ourselves. And when that happens, the Easter good news told by Jesus becomes truly visible in our midst: Christ said, *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?*

AMEN

¹ Gracia Grindal, "New Sight, New Life: Lenten Gospels," *Word & World* 16/1 (1996).