

DEATH'S CONQUEROR

by Ray C. Stedman

One of the strange delusions of our day is the quite unwarranted belief of many that medical science is making great strides in conquering disease and in eliminating or reducing the aging process. It is true, of course, that people do live longer than they did 25 or 30 years ago, and we are grateful for that. It is also true that science has virtually eliminated certain diseases that once were great killers among us; hardly anyone dies of tuberculosis, polio, diphtheria or smallpox anymore. On the other hand, however, deaths due to heart disease, cancer, etc., are skyrocketing. The striking fact that no one refers to at all today is that in spite of this apparent progress, the death rate remains exactly what it has always been -- a flat 100%!

You can jog, you can avoid cholesterol, you can watch your health and you will end up the healthiest corpse that ever died, because death is still the master of our race and nothing can be done about it.

In the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, to which we have come in the Gospel of John, we have a factual account of an eyewitness to the ability of Jesus of Nazareth to reverse the iron grip of death. Although Lazarus had been dead for four days, Jesus turned that all around and brought him back to life, not by painstaking medical research, not by voodoo and magic incantations, but by a simple word of command because he was, and is, the Master of death. This story, found in John 11, concerns a family in Bethany, Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus, who had died. It is told in three simple movements, beginning with Verse 17, each of which involves one of these three members of this family:

- In the first movement, Martha's faith is challenged;
- In the second, Mary's grief is shared;
- While in the third, Lazarus' life is restored.

The first division is found in Verse 17 and on:

Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary sat in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. And even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world." {John 11:17-27 RSV}

John shines his spotlight of memory first upon Martha, who has left the many mourners who came out from Jerusalem. Evidently Mary and Martha were well known and popular, so there were many mourners there, just across the Mount of Olives from the city of Jerusalem. Hearing that Jesus is on the way, Martha goes to meet him. This is very characteristic of her; she is a woman of action. Mary, on the other hand, in line with her more shy, more retiring nature, waits at home.

Martha greets Jesus with a phrase that must have been frequently on all of their lips when Lazarus was sick. How many times must they have said, "Oh, if Jesus were only here." They had said it so many times that it comes automatically to Martha's lips when she meets him: "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." I do not believe this is a word of reproach. Martha is not saying, "Lord, why didn't you come sooner? We sent for you. If you had responded we wouldn't be in this pickle." It is clear from the account, that she realizes that that message did not reach him until Lazarus was dead. There was no way he could have responded and gotten there before Lazarus died. Martha's word is not one of reproach, but rather one of regret:

"Lord, I wish you could have been here, because if you had, my brother would not have died."

Then she goes on to say, "But even now, even now, whatever you ask of God, he will give it to you." Many ask at this point, "What does she expect? What is it that she wants from him?" Some commentators say that she really did expect Jesus to raise Lazarus from the dead, pointing to her words, "Even now." I am reminded of Joseph Parker's comment, "When the angels want a good laugh, they read the commentaries!" Some commentators seem to miss the point because, of course, the very next word of Jesus is, "Your brother will rise again." If Martha had any idea that that would happen then, she would have said, "How wonderful, Lord! That is exactly what I expected you to do now that you have come." But she does not say that. What she says is, "Yes, I know. He will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." No, Martha is not looking for the immediate resurrection of her brother.

What, then, is she looking for from Jesus? What does she mean by the words, "Even now, whatever you ask of God, God will give it to you?" We have to conclude that she is looking for his comfort, for the release that God can give to a heart that is burdened and saddened, torn with grief, anticipating the loneliness and emptiness of the days ahead. God can give marvelous inward peace. Many have testified to that. This is what Martha is asking for, "Even now, Lord, even though he is gone..."

There is so much God can give us at a time like this. As we listen to this we can see that Martha's faith is placed right where ours often is, in what she thought would happen, not in who Jesus is and whom she is dealing with. How many times have you said to yourself, "I know God has worked in the past, and I know that he will work again in the future, but today, well, this is not the day of miracles"? Have you ever felt that way? In the daily grind of life our world seems to be so barren of miracles that we think, "Those days have gone. God can't work now. He will work again, though..." This is Martha's faith -- in the future, at the resurrection of the last day, yes, the program of God is certain. Her theology is accurate, but she has forgotten that God is right there in the here and now.

That is what Jesus brings to her attention. Notice how he shifts the focus back from the program to his Person, in the words, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" Even in the grammar of this passage the focus is on the first word, "I, I am the resurrection and the life." Jesus is saying that wherever he is, then anything God ever did or can do can happen! That is where faith ought to be fastened. That is what we ought to remember.

A phrase in the 6th chapter of the book of Hebrews comes to mind. That chapter has caused much controversy as to whether the people under discussion are believers or not. I am not going into that, but in one of the phrases describing the people of that day it says, "They have tasted of the powers of the age to come," {cf, Heb 6:5}. There is an age yet to come, and yet here are certain people who have already tasted of the powers, the miracles, the signs, the wonders of that age. I do not know what you think of when you hear that phrase, "the age to come." If you have read a certain *Late Great* book, you expect the "age to come" to be the Millennium, the Kingdom of God visible on earth. That is my own persuasion. There are others who tend to spiritualize passages describing the Kingdom visible on earth. They have time transformers -- they transform the Kingdom into an inner attitude, saying that it is the eternal state which is to come. But whichever position you take, what our Lord is saying is, the events of the last days can happen anytime and anywhere the Lord of Time chooses. He is saying, "Martha, don't talk about the 'last days.' That will happen, God's program will be carried out, but never sell short the Son of God. When he is involved in a situation [and he does not have to be physically present; this is what this book is all about, to teach us that he is operating this way today], then you can expect God to work in his own way in time."

Notice how Jesus covers all the fears of men in these wonderful words. Two groups of believers are mentioned here.

First, "He who believes in me, though he die..." There he refers to those who have already died. What about those who have died, those whose bodies are now dissolving in the dust? All of us have relatives and dear ones who are in that category. This is a word of hope addressed to those left behind: "He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live."

I once read a message by D. L. Moody, in which he said, "One day you will hear that D. L. Moody of Northfield, Massachusetts, is dead. Don't you believe it! In that day I will be more alive than I have ever been before." That is what Jesus is saying here: "Though he dies [death seizes someone you love], if he believes in me, yet shall he be living." What a hope that brings!

Then the second group: "Whoever lives and believes in me..." That is talking about us. We are not dead; we have not yet passed from this earthly scene; what about our future? The word of Jesus to us is, "Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." Actually the Greek phrasing here is very strong. It literally says, "He will never, ever die forever." He will pass from this scene, yes, through what to all appearances looks like death, but there will be no darkness, no loneliness, no separation, no limitation of his powers; he will pass immediately into life. That is the great hope that caused the Apostle Paul in Chapter 15 of I Corinthians to cry out, "O, death, where is your sting?" {cf, 1 Cor 15:55}. To the Grim Reaper, the feared lord of human life, the master of all our destinies, Paul cries, "Where is your sting? Where is your victory?" For those who believe, it is gone.

Notice that Jesus twice states the condition, "He who believes in me." I am sorry to say that Scripture holds forth no hope to those who do not believe in Jesus. To those who have had opportunity to hear his word and receive his offer of grace he extends this marvelous promise, but to those who refuse it, those who do not believe it, there is nothing ahead but darkness. This is what Jesus says; I did not write this. There only needs to be one way through death, if it is available to all. This is the promise of the gospel. It is available to all. Light from God is streaming down all the time to everybody. If you follow the light you have, dim as it may be, although it be nothing but the light of nature, it leads to more light until at last you know the way to God through Jesus Christ. "He who believes in me." That is the test.

Martha responds very nobly to this: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are (three things); the Messiah (the Christ); the Son of God (the divine Child of God, the One who is Deity himself); and, he who is coming into the world (i.e., the predicted one of the prophets)." You cannot ask for a greater response than that. She says, "Yes, Lord, I am not going to focus on the program, I am going to focus on your Person. You are what you claim to be."

With this John turns to the second movement of this story, to Mary, and her relationship with Jesus.

When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying quietly, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Then Mary, when she came where Jesus was and saw him, fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled; and he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" {John 11:28-37 RSV}

Though Mary greets Jesus with the same words as Martha, she does so in a totally different atmosphere. John stresses here that when Jesus saw her she was weeping, and all those who came with her were weeping. When Martha came to him she was far more stoical and resigned. She was a more practical, pragmatic person, and she was able to handle it better. There was no sign that she was weeping or broken up with this, though she must have grieved inside tremendously. Her faith, which Jesus focused upon, needed to be stretched. But when Mary comes she is overwhelmed with her feelings. Her heart is broken. She is torn with grief and pain. It is obvious that she is suffering tremendously from a deep sense of loss of her dear brother.

Jesus' reaction here is highly significant: He was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled." It is very difficult to capture in English what the Greek text is saying here. The word for "deeply moved in spirit" is a word that only occurs three or four times in the New Testament, and in each place it is associated with a sense of

indignation, of anger. It is a word that the Greeks used to describe a horse snorting with anger. Jesus is indignant, he is moved with anger, and it showed in his face: he "troubled himself"; he evidenced it by what he did and the way he looked. John emphasizes that his reaction to the deep grief of Mary and her friends is one of sharp anger.

Why? What is Jesus angry at? He is not angry at the people who came, as some suggest. Some of the commentators (making the angels laugh again), suggest that he was angry at the professionalism of some of the mourners. But I don't think so.

I remember a time when I first visited the Berlin Wall, not long after the close of World War II, when the city was still much in ruins and the Wall had just been erected. My spirit boiled with anger as I walked up and down that horrible dividing line between East and West Berlin and saw the little shrines dedicated to people who had tried to escape from the slavery and bondage of the Communist system into the freedom and liberty of the West, and had been shot as they tried to get over the wall. I was angry at the terrible injury of sin and slavery.

It is something of this, carried to a far greater extreme, that our Lord feels. I often feel this way when I read a newspaper account of an auto accident that takes the life of young people. I am angry that the Liar, the Murderer, that Jesus describes, has struck again. I am sure the Lord feels that way here. He is angry at the terrible results of evil. That is the same sort of anger you feel when you read of a little boy who is beaten to death by his own father, or molested and sexually destroyed by some adult whom he trusts.

But there is still another reaction here. It says that Jesus asked where they had laid Lazarus, and as he started out to the tomb, that "he wept." Actually this word is not the same as the word which described the Jews' and Mary's weeping earlier. It is a word that literally means "he broke into tears." Jesus began to shed tears. While walking to the tomb, his grief overwhelmed him, he so sympathized with them that he broke into tears, so that the Jews seeing him said, "See how he loved him." I think they misunderstood. It is true Jesus loved Lazarus, but he is not weeping for that. He knows he is on his way to raise him from the dead. He knows that in a few minutes this whole weeping crowd will be transformed into rejoicing people who can hardly believe what has happened; and that Mary and Martha are going to have their dear brother back again in their arms. No, he knows that; he has no doubt of it. He is weeping because he is sharing their heartache.

Can there be anything more beautifully descriptive of the nature of God than this? He sympathizes with them. It is a precious thing to have someone sympathize with us.

I read once of a little girl who hurt her finger, and she ran to her daddy, who was a preacher, engaged in studying. She showed him her finger, but he was so caught up in his studies he just looked at it, and said, "Oh, that will be all right," and sent her on out. She ran to her mother, weeping and crying, and her mother said, "Oh, dear, does it hurt so much?" The little girl said, "No, mommy, it's just that daddy didn't even say, 'Oh.'" That is what she wanted, somebody to say "Oh" with her. Amazingly, this is what God does with us. In Romans 12, Paul tells us to "weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice," {cf, Rom 12:15}. Here our Lord himself sets the example of this. Knowing that he is going to turn it all around, he yet feels the sorrow of their hearts and weeps.

Now we come to the actual miracle.

Then Jesus, deeply moved again [there is that same word again, feeling angry and disturbed], **came to the tomb; It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor** [The Greek is more blunt: "He stinks"], **for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. {John 11:38-41a RSV}**

There are still two obstacles remaining before Jesus can raise Lazarus:

One is the stone, the physical obstacle. According to John's testimony here, the tomb was a cave. If it is the

traditional site shown to visitors to Bethany today, the tomb of Lazarus was not a horizontal cave but a vertical one, a dungeon into which you descend by steps. (The stone lay flat on the ground on the surface.) It may have been that, although I have learned to question some of the so-called "traditional" sites. Having visited five places which were purported to be the birthplace of the virgin Mary, I have grown a bit suspicious of some of these! When I did visit this tomb, quite a number of years ago, the only remarkable thing I can remember about it was that there was a camel out in front which was drinking coke from a bottle! But whatever the nature of the cave, the stone was lying upon it.

Notice our Lord does not wave his hands and the stone vanishes. This is what Batman, or some other super-character of our day would do. But there is nothing of that. Jesus says to the people, "Take away the stone." There is always this remarkable combination of the divine and the human at work in our Lord's miracles, and so it is the people who remove the stone. Then there is still Martha's protest: "Lord, don't do this. We will all be offended by the odor." Notice how he answers. He does not rebuke her, he encourages her in the words, "Remember what I said." The word of God removes this obstacle which her momentary doubt interjected. "Remember what I said. Did I not say to you that 'if you would believe you would see the glory of God?' Trust me." How many times our faith needs some encouragement, some momentary word from the Word of God itself to steady us and keep us from faltering. This is what Martha needed.

Having strengthened her, Jesus now turns to do the great deed. He begins with a simple prayer.

And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. I knew that thou hearest me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that thou didst send me." {John 11:41b-42 RSV}

Notice the many times in this account that what Jesus did he did for the sake of the ones involved. Earlier he said to the disciples, "I am glad I was not there for your sake. He stayed two days where he was when the message reached him "because he loved Mary and Martha." It was for their sake he did so. Now he prays out loud for the sake of the people there. He wants them to see that God the Father is involved with him in this, that he is not a magic worker coming to astonish them, but that God is with him. He calls on God to work and he has every assurance, without the slightest doubt, that he will. It is a simple prayer of gratitude, a wonderful expression, spoken aloud to prove that God is behind him.

When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. {John 11:43-44a RSV}

What a sight that must have been! The loud voice was not for Lazarus -- he did not need any loud voice. When Jesus raised the young man in the village of Nain he merely spoke to him; when he raised the daughter of Jairus he only spoke to her. Our Lord does not need to call out for some soul wandering out in the darkness somewhere in order to return him to the body. No, the loud voice was for the benefit of the people that they might hear that it is his voice that summons the dead. The personal name, of course, was meant for Lazarus. As it has often been pointed out, if Jesus had not said that he would have emptied the cemetery! He himself said in Chapter 5, "The hour is coming when all they that are in the grave shall hear the voice of the Son of Man and shall come forth," {cf, John 5:25}. One day that voice will summon all the dead to rise, and all of them will, but here only Lazarus is singled out.

And Lazarus does come out; life returns to his body. We do not know how, no one can explain it, but as the onlookers breathlessly observe, suddenly a figure appears in the door of the tomb, bound in grave clothes, still wrapped in white, with a napkin still around his head, stumbling and staggering about. What a sight it must have been! It is probably good that it did not happen at night or the people would have left in droves.

But notice again the blending of the human and the divine. Life is something God alone can give, but unbinding people is something we can do. So:

Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." {John 11:44b RSV}

Last week when I was at Boise, Idaho, Dr. Walter Kaiser commented in another connection on this very verse: "This is the favorite verse of congregations. About this time on a Sunday morning their word to the preacher is, 'Loose us and let us go!'" I don't know about that, but this is what we can do. The Lord understood that this man needed more than life: he needed liberty, he needed freedom, and that is what God puts in our hands. We cannot regenerate people -- no one can -- but we can help the life they receive to be freed from the hangups of the past. We can teach them the Word that frees. We can show them fellowship. We can encourage them. We can take away the things that bind them. We can help them through problems. When the life is there, "Loose him and let him go," is addressed to us.

What does this miracle say to us this morning?

The answer to that is given by the Apostle Paul in his Second Letter to Timothy. Timothy was a young man who was left in the pagan city of Ephesus. He had to struggle to live as a Christian in that polluted, pagan environment, just as we have to today in our society. He was sometimes discouraged, sometimes defeated, facing many problems. He was a little afraid. He was timid. He was frail of health. What were Paul's words to him? "Remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead. Remember Jesus right where you are. Remember he is with you," {cf, 2 Tim 2:8}. This is his word. The glory of the good news is that he who was with but a few people in the days of his flesh is now, by means of the Spirit, always with us!

You are going back into problems this week. You face them in your home, in your work, in your personal life. Some struggle to avoid temptation; others struggle to overcome a bitter spirit. Some of you feel lonely, put upon, cheated in life. How are you going to face those problems? This is why this story is told us, that we might remember that the One who is with us is the Lord of Glory. He knows how to handle the situation you are in. He knows how to lead you through it, even, if necessary, to raise the dead or set aside the laws of nature to change it. He can do anything.

Focus your faith on him, not on the solution to the problem or the eventual working out of it, but on what he can do right now. That is where John wants us to look -- from the program to the Person.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this encouraging word, this reminder of the mighty power of our Lord, he who is Master of life and of death. We thank you that we need not be in bondage; we need not be chained by habits from the past. We are to be freed, Lord, from that which has held us victims in the past. Help us to hear the sturdy words of Paul, "Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under Law, but under grace." May we go now with the blessing of the Father and the Son and the Spirit resting upon us. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

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