

THE SECRET OF LIFE

Ted Schroder, February 28, 2010

A beloved friend of Jesus, Lazarus, lived with his two sisters, Martha and Mary, in Bethany, less than two miles from Jerusalem. He became terribly sick, and his sisters sent word to Jesus to come. When he heard, Jesus told his disciples that the sickness would not be terminal, but would become an occasion to show God's glory by glorifying God's Son. He waited two days before starting on his journey to Bethany. As they traveled Jesus went on to tell his companions, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up. They replied, Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." But Jesus had been talking about his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. Then Jesus became explicit: "Lazarus died. And I am glad for your sakes that I wasn't there. You're about to be given new grounds for believing."

Jesus characterizes death as sleep, from which he could wake up Lazarus. He said the same thing about Jairus's daughter: "She is not dead but asleep." (Luke 8:52) This is the attitude Jesus wants us to have about death in him. "We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him." (1 Thessalonians 4:14) "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed." (1 Corinthians 15:51) Every night, when we fall asleep, is a little death. Every morning, when we awake, is a little resurrection. As e.e.cummings wrote: "I who have died am alive again today." Just as sleep is not final, for we awake to a new day; death in the presence of Jesus, the eternally present one, the giver of light and the bread of life, is not final; and he will wake us up in Paradise, as he promised the penitent thief on the cross. Do you believe this? Jesus says: "You're about to be given new grounds for believing."

On his arrival at Bethany they found that Lazarus had been dead for four days. Martha greeted him with the lament, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." What did she expect from Jesus? What are our expectations of God when we suffer grief? Jesus said, "Your brother will rise again." Martha answered, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." In her grief she holds on to her hope in the final resurrection. But Jesus keeps her in the present by saying to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Jesus, through whom all things came into being, as the source of life, offers eternal life to all who trust and follow him. "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." (John 17:3) Life lived with Jesus will never cease. You don't have to wait for the last day for resurrection. Real resurrection takes place in and through Jesus as you give yourself to him in faith. In these words Jesus transfers the future to the present, the end to the now. He assures Martha, and us, that the believer in him never really dies.

Mary arrives on the scene. She fell at his feet weeping, with all the other mourners who were also weeping. In the face of such inconsolable sorrow Jesus was deeply moved and troubled, and himself wept. Why is he so deeply moved if he believes in the resurrection? He is angry at death and the grief it brings. His anger brings him to tears. He is directly confronting death. He is outraged by the sorrow it causes.

Coming to the tomb, he is once more deeply moved, troubled, angry. With a shout of authority he orders, "Take away the stone," that lays across the entrance to the cave.

Martha protests, for she does not yet believe that Jesus can awaken her brother from the sleep of death. In the midst of death, it is hard to believe anything but our senses. The body is dead. The mortal remains are cremated. The grave seems so final. We hear the words of Jesus at the funeral, "I am the resurrection and the life...." Do you believe this? In the light of the departure of the loved one, the sight of the clothes hanging in the closet, no longer worn, the car no longer driven, the personal effects no longer used, how can you believe in the resurrection of the body? Do you believe this?

After praying for the benefit of the people standing by the tomb that they may believe in him, Jesus shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out....yes, that is what he is called. He is dead, yet he walked out. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." What were they thinking? Do you believe this is happening?

This incident tells us about the power of Jesus over death. "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades." (Revelation 1:17,18) He is continually bringing forth life from death, creating life out of nothing, order out of chaos. Do you believe this?

What does it mean to face the grave in the company of Jesus? What did it mean to Martha and Mary? What does it mean to lose a loved one in the company of Jesus? When you ask him to be present how does he transform your understanding of Christian death? How does his presence affect your sorrow, your grief? "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope." (1 Thessalonians 4:13)

What does it mean to face your own death in the company of Jesus? Lazarus stands for all of us. He calls each one of us to come out of the tomb of corruption, to wake up from our sleep, to die to the old way of life, and put on the new life. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

"Robert McAfee Brown was an American army chaplain on a troopship in which 1,500 Marines were returning from Japan to the U.S. for discharge. Greatly to his surprise he was approached by a small group to do Bible study with them. He leapt at the opportunity. Near the end of the voyage, they were studying John 11 and afterward a marine came to him. "Everything in that chapter," he said, "is pointing at me." He went on to say that he had been in hell for the last six months. He had gone straight into the marines from college. He had been sent out to Japan. He had been bored with life; and he had gone out and got into trouble – bad trouble. Nobody knew about it – except God. He felt guilty; he felt his life was ruined; he felt he could never face his family although they need never know; he felt he had killed himself and was a dead man. "And," said this young marine, "after reading this chapter I have come alive again. I know that this resurrection Jesus was talking about is real here and now, for he has raised me from death to life." That lad's troubles were not finished; he had a hard road to go; but in his sin and his sense of guilt he had found Jesus as the resurrection and the life." (William Barclay, *Gospel of John*, Vol.2, p.102)

What about you? Do you believe this for your life now? If so, take off your grave clothes, and clothe yourself with Christ. (Romans 13:14)

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