



## Without a Net



*When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said 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 greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see."*

*Jesus began to weep. 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 11:32–37 NRSV)

**T**HE STORY OF THE RAISING of Lazarus is found only in the gospel according to John, and it is a disturbing story. In the first place, it seems that Lazarus' death was untimely. He was a contemporary of Jesus', along with his sisters Martha and Mary, which means that he was a young man—in his thirties, say, when he was felled by a mysterious illness. We are told that Jesus loved the whole family, and yet when he received word that Lazarus was ill, he did not drop everything and rush to his friend's side. Lazarus lived in Judea, for one thing, and Jesus was already in

deep trouble with the authorities there. If he returned, he was likely to be arrested. But beyond that, the message was not an urgent one. "Lord, he whom you love is ill," read the note from Martha and Mary. No reason for Jesus to believe that the illness was life-threatening, no warning that he should hurry.

For whatever reasons, he arrived in Bethany two days later to find that his friend Lazarus *had* died, and had been lying in his tomb for four days. According to Jewish custom, this meant that Lazarus' body had begun to rot and that his soul had departed. Jesus' friend was, in other words, completely, irrevocably dead. Without knowing they did so, both Martha and Mary greeted Jesus with the same words: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." There was no accusation in their words, no bitterness. The death was sudden, unexpected, tragic, but the women did not blame Jesus; they simply recognized that if he had been with Lazarus things would have turned out differently. But he was not, and Lazarus had been dead four days, and there was a lot of weeping on the part of those who were not ready to let him go.

Jesus' own response was puzzling. He was "deeply moved," the Bible says, but the word in Greek means more than that. It suggests that he was not only moved but angry, full of righteous wrath and ready to explode. Angry? At whom? The commentaries say Jesus was angry because everyone was crying, which meant they had no faith in him, but that cannot be the whole story because in the next moment he too was weeping. Jesus wept, and it is my wild and subjective guess that his tears were for the whole world, tears so full of anger and sadness that it was hard to tell where one left off and the other began. He wept tears for his friends Martha and Mary in their grief; tears over the loss of his friend Lazarus; tears about the frailty of life and the randomness with which it was snuffed out; tears that no one seemed to understand what he

was about, much less believe it; tears over the enormity of what he had been given to do and how alone he was.

Then Jesus let Martha and Mary lead him to Lazarus' tomb. The text is factual here and we have no details to aid our imaginations, but who knows how an eyewitness might have described the scene? *At first he just stood there staring at the stone that blocked the mouth of the cave where Lazarus lay. He stared so that you would not have wanted to walk between him and that stone; he stared so that you would not have wanted him to look at you at all. Then he began to tremble, his whole body shaking with some great effort going on inside of him. His face grew dark, the veins in his neck stood out like ropes, and that is when the air started to crackle, just before he opened his mouth and bellowed like a bull, "Lazarus, come out!" Then there was a commotion in the earth, the sound of a thousand wings in the sky, and a moan from inside that tomb like someone being torn limb from limb. I tell you, if you had asked me who I would rather have faced at that moment, Lazarus or a Philistine coming at me with a sword, I would have chosen the Philistine.*

But it was Lazarus who came forth, stumbling out of his tomb wrapped in linen bandages, his face concealed by a cloth. "Unbind him," Jesus said, "and let him go." And that is all we know about Lazarus. Yanked from the jaws of death, the beneficiary of Jesus' greatest miracle, he drops from the scene and is never mentioned again. No one asks him what it was like to be dead, or if they do he does not answer. He does not go on to be Jesus' most devoted disciple or to preach inspiring sermons, or even to visit the sick and console the dying. Mute, Lazarus simply disappears from view.

Novelists, playwrights, and poets have imagined a future for him—how, in the days after his resurrection, he sits in the darkest corner of his house in Bethany, bothered by the light, smelling of earth and incense, with twigs and grass in his hair. People kneel in front of him to ask him things, to offer him some bread, a bath, a

skin of wine, but he does not respond. A silent, emaciated man, he is less profound than befuddled; nothing makes sense to him anymore, not his sudden death, nor his equally sudden return to life. Lazarus did not ask for either of them. What everyone so far has either been too polite or too afraid to mention is that after all this—the days of pain and fever, the days of hearing his sisters weeping somewhere in the house, after everything it took for him finally to let go of his life and surrender to death—after all this, he has been hauled back into the light and *must do it all again*. He is a walking miracle. He has been brought back to life, but it is a temporary reprieve. Sooner or later he will be carried back into his tomb, and this time for good.

We must all, finally, die. As fervently as we pray for healing and long life, as glad as we are on the occasions when those prayers are granted, we must all finally die and it is the darkest mystery each of us must face. Like Martha and Mary, we appeal to some power that will protect us from it. Like Jesus, we weep with the enormity of our sadness and anger at it. Like Lazarus, we find no words that can make sense of it. And is there anything in the world we would like better than to make sense of it all? To know *why*, when, and how we die, to know where death fits in the divine economy of things, to have reliable evidence that death is just a dark door into a brighter world where *everything* makes sense? If there is one word our hearts can be counted on to cry out when we are afraid, it is “*Why?*” *Why me, why this, why now?* As if understanding would make our fear go away. Or if we were given a very good reason, like “You are needed somewhere else” or “There is nothing more for you to learn here,” then we would not be afraid. Ha!

It is not explanations we want, at least not for themselves; it is the security and sense of control those explanations might give us. Tell us *why*, God, and maybe we can offer a convincing

argument *why* not. Tell us *why*, and maybe we can be so outraged by the answer that we decide to reject it and manufacture answers of our own. Tell us anything we can handle, tinker with, control, but do not ask us just to believe—believe what? *That everything will be all right*. How, exactly? *Just all right*. Will I still be me? *It will be all right*. Please, God, give us something we can work with, something we can hold onto. Do not ask us to step out into the air without a net.

It is the ancient, ancient cry of the human heart: *Why me, why this, why now?* Don't you care that we perish? Give us something to hold onto! My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?

They are strong words, strong questions to ask the ruler of the universe, but they are the truth of how we feel when we cannot make sense of what happens to us, when we are not given a reason. We feel abandoned, forsaken, but because the patriarchs and prophets and even Jesus himself have joined us in these words and feelings, they are not something we must hide. To have faith in God, to have faith that we are in good hands, to have faith that whether or not we understand it, the universe makes sense—that is the hardest choice any of us must ever make. To decide it is all true is to step out into the air without a net, because we have no proof, no evidence, nothing but the adamant witness of our own hearts that it is so. We simply give up the illusion that we are in control of our lives and step out. Which is *why*, perhaps, it is called a *leap* of faith.

I was talking earlier this week with a friend of mine about this sermon, about death and the damnation of not knowing what will happen to us. He has lost several dear friends in recent summers, mostly men his age who have died in a number of bizarre ways: one from a cerebral hemorrhage on his way home from a lecture tour, one from a heart attack while jogging and one, inexplicably, from a sudden lightning bolt while fishing with his

family. My friend worries, of course, that he will be next, and while he worries he keeps remembering a scene from his boyhood in a southern town. He used to traipse down to the river with some of the older boys and watch them swing far out over the fast-moving water on a rope tied to the branch of a tree. He sat and watched them arc across the sky and then let go of the rope, falling down the air and disappearing into the current. A little ways downstream their heads broke the surface of the water and they swam back to shore, egging him on, urging him to take a turn in the air.

My friend was afraid, but decided to try; they were his friends, after all, and he had watched them do it. He grasped the rope, got a running start, and swung far out over the water. At the height of his ride he willed his hands to let go of the rope, but they would not—it was so far, the water was so fast, he was so afraid. He had watched how the other boys did it, but he had not a clue what allowed them to let go of the rope. So he hung there, dangling between sky and the river, until someone hauled him back to earth.

I do not know how many tries it took him before he finally let go, but he said that when he finally did, it was because of his friends. "They had all gone ahead of me," he said. "I had watched each of them let go and finally I just made up my mind that if they could do it, I could do it, too. Without knowing what would happen, without knowing whether I would make it or how it would be, I just opened my hands and let go, because I wanted to join those who had gone ahead of me." He remembers that episode, he says, because that is what it is like now, watching his friends die. Still afraid of letting go, he has watched each of them do it and he believes more and more that maybe, just maybe, when it is his turn he can do it too, if only because they have gone ahead of him.

Fine, you may say, that is a very nice story, but there is one very important difference: those boys swam back to shore to tell him everything would be all right. Who has come back across the river of death to tell us the same thing? It all depends on whom you believe, and if you believe. There was Ezekiel's miracle in the valley of dry bones, for one thing, and there was Lazarus for another, although as far as we can tell he never said anything at all. And then there was Lazarus' friend Jesus, who faced his own death with great uncertainty and fear but was willing to let go, to step out into the air without a net. Someone said they saw him later and that he talked about peace, about how it had turned out there was nothing to fear after all, and the water was fine. It all depends on whom we believe, and if we believe. It all depends on whether, when it is our turn, we can let go of the rope, let go of our illusions of control, let go of our fears, and step out into whatever God-given, death-defying mystery comes next.