

The Resurrection of Lazarus
(c. 1450)
Fra Angelico

The Story

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you and are you going there again?" Jesus

answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "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?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 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?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." 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 strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." **(From John 11:1-44 in the NRSV)**



A Meditation on the Raising of Lazarus

What I love about this story is that it happens in the context of community. First there are Lazarus's sisters, Martha and Mary. See them in the painting with halos kneeling. (Painters often gave halos to the important characters in the story.) Then there were the family and friends, the community that came to mourn with the sisters. You can see some of the mourners at the left. I love the realism of both the painting and the story. Lazarus has been dead four days. A decomposing body stinks. See how the woman is covering her nose against the stench. Then there are all the disciples. See them standing behind Jesus with their halos.

In the painting, Jesus has convinced them to take away the stone that is covering the opening to the tomb. He has called Lazarus out of the tomb. And amazingly, Lazarus has stumbled out of the dark tomb and stands before Jesus and them all. He is alive again. Yet he still stinks of death and the grave, and he is still bound by the winding sheets. Here is my favorite part. Jesus says to the community gathered around, "Unbind him, and let him go." Jesus brings Lazarus back to Life, but he expects the community to unbind him, to complete the work of setting Lazarus free.

Often I feel that parts of me are buried in a dark place. Sometimes, even as I live, I feel gripped by the power of death, bound by fear, anxiety, loss, depression. I trust that Jesus brings me back to life and I stumble out into the Light. Still, I feel bound by old ways of living and thinking, old habits, addictions, the knot of broken relationships. Sometimes I feel cinched by soul crushing circumstances. I need others to unbind me. Sometimes a visit or phone call to a trusted friend helps untangle the winding sheets. Sometimes I visit a counselor. Sometimes praying with a community of believers helps. Sometimes I have to let others pray for me. I need Jesus to make me alive again. I depend on the community to help loose the winding sheets that I may truly live into the freedom to which Jesus calls me.

Kim Messenger, 9/24/06

Could one of these prayers be the right one for you today?

From the words of Holy Communion: *"In [Christ], [God has] brought us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life." "Rising from the grave, you [Christ] destroyed death, and made the whole creation new."*

Jesus, I am grieving for _____. Please weep with me.

Jesus, a part of me is dead and in the dark. Please bring me back to Life and into the Light.

Jesus, thank you for calling me into new Life. I want to follow you into a new way of living, but I am bound by old ways of living and thinking, by habits, and addictions. Please send me helpers to unbind me that I may live in freedom of new Life.

Jesus, someone I care about is bound by old ways of living and thinking, by habits, and addictions, by broken relationships, by crushing circumstances. It is a messy situation. Please call them into Life and into the Light. Help me aid their unbinding that they may live in freedom of new Life.