

# Before the Miracle

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*The Lord’s power overcame me, and while I was in the Lord’s spirit, he led me out and set me down in the middle of a certain valley. It was full of bones. He led me through them all around, and I saw that there were a great many of them on the valley floor, and they were very dry. He asked me, “Human one, can these bones live again?” I said, “Lord God, only you know.” He said to me, “Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, Dry bones, hear the Lord’s word! The Lord God proclaims to these bones: I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again. I will put sinews on you, place flesh on you, and cover you with skin. When I put breath in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the Lord.” I prophesied just as I was commanded. There was a great noise as I was prophesying, then a great quaking, and the bones came together, bone by bone. When I looked, suddenly there were sinews on them. The flesh appeared, and then they were covered over with skin. But there was still no breath in them. He said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, human one! Say to the breath, The Lord God proclaims: Come from the four winds, breath! Breathe into these dead bodies and let them live.” I prophesied just as he commanded me. When the breath entered them, they came to life and stood on their feet, an extraordinarily large company. He said to me, “Human one, these bones are the entire house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely finished.’ So now, prophecy and say to them, The Lord God proclaims: I’m opening your graves! I will raise you up from your graves, my people, and I will bring you to Israel’s fertile land. You will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, my people. I will put my breath in you, and you will live. I will plant you on your fertile land, and you will know that I am the Lord. I’ve spoken, and I will do it. This is what the Lord says.”* Ezekiel 37:1-14

*I cry out to you from the depths, Lord—my Lord, listen to my voice! Let your ears pay close attention to my request for mercy! If you kept track of sins, Lord—my Lord, who would stand a chance? But forgiveness is with you—that’s why you are honored. I hope, Lord. My whole being hopes, and I wait for God’s promise. My whole being waits for my Lord—more than the night watch waits for morning; yes, more than the night watch waits for morning! Wait for the Lord! Because faithful love is with the Lord; because great redemption is with our God! God is the one who will redeem God’s people from all its sin.* Psalm 130

*Now a certain man was ill, Laz’arus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Laz’arus was ill. So the sisters sent to him, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” But when Jesus heard it he said, “This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it.” Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Laz’arus. So when he heard that he was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go into Judea again.” The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?” Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If any one walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if any one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” Thus he spoke, and then he said to them, “Our friend Laz’arus has fallen asleep, but I go to awake him out of sleep.” The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, “Laz’arus is dead; and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” Now a certain man was ill, Laz’arus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Laz’arus was ill. So the sisters sent to him, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” But when Jesus heard it he said, “This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it.” Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Laz’arus. So when he heard that he was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go into Judea again.” The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?” Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” Thus he spoke, and then he said to them, “Our friend Laz’arus has fallen asleep, but I go to awake him out of sleep.” The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, “Laz’arus is dead; and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” Now when Jesus came, he found that Laz’arus 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.” 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?” Then Jesus, deeply moved again, 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, 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. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. I knew that thou bearest me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that thou didst send 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 bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him.* John 11:1-45 (RSV)

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's hard to believe, but we're in the last few days of this season of Lent. This last week moves us into Holy Week and the beginning of our journey to the cross with Jesus. I know that life is busy and there are a few extra things on the calendar next week, but I would really encourage you to participate in as much of Holy Week as you can. I know Easter is wonderful and joyful, but there's a lot that happens in between Palm Sunday and the Resurrection, and as we live into our most sacred holy days, we learn to trust that God is at work not only in the joyful parts of the story, but also in the quiet, confusing, and heartbreaking parts, too.

When I studied the scriptures for today, what I kept noticing is where all of these stories begin. They all begin in places that feel like the end of something. Ezekiel is set down in a valley full of dusty bones. The psalmist is crying out from the depths of the pit. And in the Gospel, by the time Jesus gets to Bethany, Lazarus has already died and been buried. The tomb has already been closed. And when Martha meets Jesus on the road, she says to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When I think about that line, I hear more than one thing in it. I hear faith in it, because she still comes out to meet him and she still calls him Lord. But I also hear grief in it, and maybe even a little bit of frustration. It sounds like something a real person would say, not something an archetypal Bible character is supposed to say.

The first reading today is the story of Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones. God brings the prophet out and sets him down in a valley that is full of bones, and the text makes a point of telling us that there are very many bones and that they are very dry. Whatever life was here is long gone.

And then God asks Ezekiel a question: “can these bones live?” Ezekiel is standing in a valley full of death, and God asks him a question about life. I have always appreciated Ezekiel’s answer. He does not say yes, and he does not say no. He says, “Lord God, only you know.” Which feels like the most honest answer he could give. Ezekiel is looking at something that is completely beyond his ability to even imagine.

Then the vision unfolds slowly. The bones come together, bone to bone. Then sinews and muscle form. Then skin covers them. I can almost imagine Ezekiel watching this happen and thinking that this must be the moment when life returns. But then the text says, very plainly, “There was still no breath in them.” They are put back together, but they are not living yet. And only when God breathes into them do they stand up on their feet, alive again. Later God explains the vision and says, “These bones are the whole house of Israel.” This vision is about a people who believe their story is over. They even say it out loud: “Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely finished.” And into that situation, God says, “I will put my breath in you, and you will live.” Life, in this story, comes from the breath of God.

As our scripture journey today moves into the Gospel of John, we hear a familiar story of the death of a loved one and how the family deals with it. I think I expect Lazarus' death to be the hardest moment for them, but what strikes me is that the hardest part of this story seems to be Jesus' delay. The sisters send word to Jesus, "Lord, this one you love so much is ill." It says, "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." And then the very next thing it tells us is that he stayed where he was two more days. To be quite honest, that's the part of the story I find the hardest to understand. It would almost be easier if the text did not tell us that Jesus loved them. But it does. It goes out of its way to say it. Jesus loved them, and yet he still did not come right away.

By the time Jesus arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has died, and the tomb has been closed. And both Martha and Mary say the same thing to him: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." That confession comes from people who believe in Jesus and love Jesus and yet, feel like he did not get there when they needed him to. "If you had been here sooner. If you had done something. If you had answered this prayer the way I hoped."

One of the things that becomes clear in this story is that Jesus is not working on the same timeline as everyone else. The sisters send word because they believe Jesus can heal Lazarus, and they are right. Jesus has healed many people before this. But Jesus does not come to heal Lazarus. He comes to raise Lazarus. And those are not the same thing. Healing would have kept Lazarus from dying. Resurrection brings life out of death. And that is a different kind of sign, a different kind of power, and a different kind of hope. It does not make the waiting easier for Mary and Martha, but it does mean that Jesus is doing something larger than they expected.

I also notice that when Jesus finally arrives, he does not begin by explaining the delay. He does not sit Mary and Martha down and tell them why this had to happen this way. He listens to them. He hears their grief. He sits with them. He weeps with them. Whatever the reason for the delay, the story makes it very clear that the delay does not mean Jesus stopped loving them. If anything, the story goes out of its way to show that love is present in every part of it, in the waiting, in the grief, in the conversation on the road, and in the tears at the tomb.

After Martha says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,” she says something else that is easy to miss. She says, “But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” That is such an interesting sentence. To me, it doesn’t sound like she has data that he will still be able to resurrect Lazarus. It sounds like she’s throwing stuff to the wall and seeing what sticks.

And that is when Jesus says to her, “Your brother will rise again.” And Martha answers the way many faithful people would answer. She says, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” In other words, she moves the conversation into the future. Someday. At the end. At the resurrection. She believes in resurrection, but she believes in it as something far away, something that belongs to God’s final future, not something that has anything to do with this road, this moment, this grief.

And then Jesus shifts the whole conversation. He says, “I am the resurrection and the life.” Not “I will be.” Not “I can bring resurrection.” He says, “I am.” Standing right there in front of her, on that road, while Lazarus is still in the tomb and nothing has been fixed yet. And I think what Jesus is doing in that moment is moving resurrection out of the distant future and placing it right in front of her, in the middle of her grief, in the middle of her confusion, in the middle of her life as it actually is, not as she wishes it were.

And Martha responds with that confession: “Yes, Lord, I believe.” Not because she understands everything that is about to happen. Not because Lazarus is out of the tomb. She says it on the road, before the miracle, before anything has changed. She says it while the tomb is still closed.

By the time they arrive at the tomb, death seems pretty final. The stone is in place. The mourning has begun. Martha even says, very practically, “Lord, there will be a stench.” While my brother and I thought that was hilarious as kids, especially in the King James Version, ‘but Lord he stinketh,’ Martha is not being negative. She is just telling the truth about the situation. This is what death looks like. This is what loss looks like. And Jesus tells them to take away the stone anyway.

What happens next is the moment we usually focus on. Jesus prays, and then he calls out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” And Lazarus comes out of the tomb, his hands and feet still bound, his face still wrapped in cloth.

Jesus turns to the people standing there and instructs them to, “Unbind him, and let him go.” Studying this text this year I saw something I hadn’t seen before. Jesus raises Lazarus, but the community is the one that unbinds him. The community is the one that takes the grave clothes off. The community is the one that helps him step back into life again. Lazarus does not do that alone.

I think that might be where this story finally meets us. Because I don’t think any of us can raise the dead. But all of us know what it is like to feel wrapped up in something that we cannot get out of by ourselves. Grief can wrap around a person. Fear can do that. Shame can do that. Loneliness can do that. There are a lot of ways to be alive and still feel like we are walking out of a tomb with our hands and feet still bound. And one of the things the church is supposed to be is a community that helps unbind one another. Not a community that pretends we were never in the tomb, and not a community that ignores the grave clothes, but a community that gently, patiently helps take the wrappings off so that people can move into the life God is giving them.

And that is why I believe this story shows up here, at the end of Lent, when we are about to journey into Holy Week. Because this story points forward. Lazarus walks out of a tomb, and not long after this, Jesus will walk toward a cross. This story reminds us that God is already at work in the valley, and in the depths, and at the tomb, even before Easter morning arrives. And sometimes the work God gives us is to simply to be there for one another, and when the time comes, to help unbind each other and go free. Amen.