

Stripped of Grave Clothes

John 11:1-44

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There are certain drawbacks to being a pastor's kid. One would be the convenience factor of always being available to carry out a parish errand or assignment. You never know when that clergy parent of yours may conscript you into a peculiar form of service for which you never bargained.

The raising of Lazarus was the appointed text one Sunday morning. Our son Jacob, then in seventh grade, got the word the night before: "Jacob, I need your help for the children's message tomorrow. Would you be willing?" He had no idea what was in store for the next morning, but in his wonderfully cooperative way, his reply was, "Sure, Dad."

I showed him the cardboard refrigerator box in the basement from which I had cut out one of the tall sides. Laid horizontally, with a large black cloth stretched over the open top, this box approximated the look of a coffin. This would constitute the grave in which Jacob would lie like a dead man, right in front of the altar. The tough news to break to this innocent 12-year-old servant came when I informed him that I needed him to begin his motionless duty a full 25 minutes before the start of worship. Climbing into the box any time closer to the opening hymn would expose the secret of his hidden presence to arriving worshippers.

Early Sunday morning, two colleagues joined me in wrapping Jacob from head to toe. Four rolls of toilet paper served as the perfect grave clothes. We walked circles around him until he was thoroughly mummified. A small opening at the mouth allowed him to breathe. Then we gingerly lowered this firstborn child of mine into his burial vault. The black cloth atop the box sealed the deal. I whispered thanks and goodbye.

During the first 40 minutes of worship, I kept a close eye on this box – the one with my lovable son inside. The box never moved, even slightly. When it finally came time to call the children forward, I began telling these young ones of Lazarus dying and then rising from the dead. On cue, and at the bellowing sound of the words, "Lazarus, come out!" the box began to shift. Something was stirring inside. Suddenly I had 75 kids in front of me with the collective facial expression of a child with wet pants. The black cloth began to balloon upward as Lazarus – I mean Jacob – slowly arose. As the cloth fell to the side, a skinny little Michelin-like man stood upright before the congregation.

As worshippers were making their own sense of this Sunday morning resurrection, I began to peel the tissue off of Jacob's face. It seemed only right that he should be given the chance to see and breathe. What I had not accounted for in this unventilated box was the heat. The poor kid was drenched in sweat. Tissue clung to his clothing and skin like saturated gauze. I gently peeled scraps from his eyebrows, nose, and ears. I called on the children to help me unbind him.

As we performed the delicate task of separating soggy tissue from my son's skin, I began to contemplate the actual experience of Lazarus rising from the dead. The

odor emanating from this sibling of Mary and Martha was not perspiration, but the stink of death. His eyebrows were not caked with shredded tissue, but with clumps of grass and dirt. We have no reason to believe that children were on hand to pull twigs from Lazarus' ruffled hair, but somebody was. Rising from the dead evidently does not afford one the power to unbind oneself. It takes the assistance of a community.

What scripture fails to reveal is what happened next to Lazarus. What do you do with yourself once you've experience the other side and come back? What on earth do you do when you are given newness of life? *That* is the question we need to answer. And we need to answer it candidly through the shape of our own lives.

In the absence of solid scriptural witness, some delightful tales about the whereabouts of the resuscitated Lazarus' surfaced over time. One tradition suggests that he fled to the island of Cyprus where Paul later ordained him. Another has him escaping to France where he later became bishop of Marseilles. Nice thoughts, to be sure. Sweet stories. None too likely, however. So what happened to Lazarus once he got home from the cemetery, took a clean shower, and woke up the next morning?

In his poem, "Adjusting to the Light," Miller Williams suggests it wasn't easy for Lazarus to navigate this newness of life. There was awkwardness built into his reappearance in the land of the living. Nobody was sure how to include him. Mary and Martha wrestled with how to break the news that life had moved on.

Lazarus, listen, we have things to tell you. We killed the sheep you meant to take to market. We couldn't keep the old dog, either. He minded you. The rest of us he barked at. Rebecca, who cried two days, has given her hand to the sandalmaker's son. Please understand – we didn't know that Jesus could do this.

We're glad you're back. But give us time to think. Imagine our surprise. ... We want to say we're sorry for all of that. And one thing more. We threw away the lyre. But listen, we'll pay whatever the sheep was worth. The dog, too. And put your room the way it was before.¹

Once given a shot at new life, then what? The road of new life isn't always paved the way we thought it would be. Life is different on the other side. Being all bound up has its comforts. Becoming unbound has its unknowns.

In one of the liturgical confessions of our church, the congregation prays: "And grant that we may serve you in newness of life." It is an appropriately worded prayer. If we are going to walk in newness of life, we're probably going to need some help. So, we pray, "Grant us this help, O Lord." And if, as Paul puts it, the time has come for us to stop viewing our new life in Christ from a human point of view, and we are supposed to start behaving like new creations, then we are going to have to figure out how to adjust our eyes to the light. Anything less will have us squinting. People will confuse us with half-dead zombies. They'll be quick to notice the grass in our eyebrows, the twigs in our hair, and the soggy gauze hanging from our ears. But they will miss the very signs of new life with which Christ has blessed us.

Part of the challenge of living the Christian life well is to *want* the transformation that comes with starting over. We have to want to be changed. If Christ has been raised from the dead, then we have to discover how to walk in newness of life. We have to be open to seeing new possibilities. We actually have to want the new.

Elizabeth Kolbert, writing about Christopher Columbus, notes that the most distinguishing legacy of this explorer may well be “his reluctance to acknowledge the magnitude of what he had found.” He never wanted to believe that he actually had come upon something new. In spite of everything he encountered that was contrary to his expectations, over the course of four separate trans-Atlantic trips, Columbus remained insistent that Cuba was part of China. Says Kolbert: “He didn’t want to have discovered someplace new; he wanted to have reached someplace old, and as a result, was blind to the real nature of the world he had stumbled onto.”² When Columbus died in 1506, he died a bitter man, absent of friends and respect. Fixated by the comfortable boundaries of what his mind allowed room for – and no more – and closed to the implications of some brilliant new discoveries, Columbus concluded his earthly days in despair.

Adjusting to the light of new life, new discovery, and new hope can be difficult. We only have to think of freshly released prisoners. Ex-convicts will be the first to admit that the pressures of new life outside of jail are far greater than those of the old life within. While imprisoned, daily routines are fixed. Food arrives on schedule. Rules know no ambiguity.

Recovering alcoholics face similar challenges when presented with the new life of sobriety. How frightening to walk into the uncharted territory of such newness of life when the bottle used to tell you what to do and what moves to make.

When Jesus breaks down and weeps near the tomb of Lazarus, his tears are not because Lazarus has died. They flow from his observation that faith and hope have died. He is shaken and distressed. Everybody associated with Lazarus seems given over to the control of death. They seem to believe more in death than in Jesus. The reaction of Jesus is *embrimaomai*, or as one translation has it, “He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.”³ *Embrimaomai* is the snort of a warhorse, or for humans, the outburst of anger. Jesus is bothered that those so close to him cannot perceive his power to bring newness of life.

Separately, Mary and Martha lecture Jesus on his tardiness – “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” These women subscribe less to the God of life and more to the culture of death. Jesus does what he can to usher them into the light that is beyond the confining bondage of death. “I am the resurrection and the life,” he says to them. Or, in different words, “You are looking right at new life. I am it. I am standing right in front of you. Why do you refuse to look forward instead of backward? Why do you walk as if death has won?”

It can be hard to walk in newness of life. Very hard. Jesus can say all he wants and encourage everyone attached to the old to believe in the new. He can even position his body right in front of skeptics. But Mary and Martha have to want the new life he offers. Lazarus has to decide if the unpredictable turns of his new life outweigh the coziness of his grave. We have to figure out whether we, as creatures who think of ourselves as *in Christ*, really believe that “everything old has passed away ... [and] everything has become new.”⁴ Or, do these just happen to be nice sounding words with a religious ring?

It is worth coming to terms with what we really *want* from our life in Christ. The more we get excited about the wild and unpredictable decisions that accompany this newness of life, the better equipped we will be to face the different powers of death that come knocking. And knocking they will come ... over and over again.

My son had barely combed his hair and dried out his clothes from the moist cardboard grave. That is when I had to find the courage to say, “Jacob, guess what? I hate to break the news, but the next service starts in 45 minutes. I need you to do the grave thing all over again. I’m so sorry. But, you were great. The way you died and came to life again was just great!”

Notes

1 Miller Williams, *Adjusting to the Light* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 3.

2 Elizabeth Kolbert, “The Lost Mariner,” *The New Yorker* (October 14, 2002), 211.

3 John 11:33.

4 2 Corinthians 5:17.