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Why the Church Keeps Growing, Part 1 *Getting Rid of Our Grave Clothes*

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John 11:38-44 (ESV)

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against 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 believed you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Good morning, everyone, and welcome to worship. It's great to have you with us, joining us in a time when we gather together to encourage each other in our faith journeys and also stir each other on to love and good deeds.

A special welcome to those worshipping online as well. Great to have you joining us.

I've been thinking this week about a small village entitled Bethany some 2,000 years ago. Bethany is a small town of probably less than 500 people, just east of Jerusalem. I have a map of it here on the screen. It was about two miles from Jerusalem, there just on the other side of the Mount of Olives. And anyone who entered Jerusalem from the east likely went through Bethany and then Bethpage before they got to the city of Jerusalem.

And so the people in these towns were hospitable, and they probably had some good income from those that would travel through their villages on the way to Jerusalem. And they often made many friends from people who went to and from the city there.

And there is a family there who is in sort of dire straits because one of the members of the family has been sick. And this gentleman is an icon of the community. He is sort of a patriarch there. He's well known not just in Bethany but also in Jerusalem.

And he has two sisters, and the three siblings live together. And because he is sick, they have also become friends with travelers that have come through.

And one of the travelers that they've been friends with is named Jesus. And they have become close friends with Jesus. They've seen him do miracles. They've heard testimony of all that he's done. They have worshipped at his feet. They have come to understand that he is one sent from outside of this world.

And so when Lazarus is sick, the sisters send word to their friend Jesus. And Jesus is not in Jerusalem. He's not near that area because when he was in Jerusalem, they tried to stone him. And so Jesus went eastward with his disciples and was preaching across the Jordan River, over two days' travel away from Bethany.

But Mary and Martha send word to Jesus, and they say to him, this friend of yours, the one that you love, is sick.

Now, when we get into a gospel text, we understand that the Spirit of God inspired this text, and he didn't write things for no purpose. And so we read in this text that after Jesus heard that his friend Lazarus was sick, uniquely, he stayed where he was two more days.

I don't know if you've ever been frustrated by God in your life, but I certainly have. I've prayed about numerous things over the years for which I feel like I've gotten no response—at least no immediate response. And there are some things I continue to pray about that I feel like I have heard nothing from heaven yet on, and I continue to send messages to the Lord in this way. And it's frustrating when you don't hear back from it.

These sisters were friends with Jesus. Jesus loved Lazarus. They sent a message that he was sick. And yet Jesus heard this message and said something about this sickness not ending in death to his disciples. But then he just sort of lingered where he was and didn't respond. Didn't take any action.

A couple days later, he said to his disciples, it's time to go back to Judea, to head towards Jerusalem. His disciples warned him against doing this because of what had happened the last time he was there. He was cautioned because if he went there, he would likely be stoned again or put to death. But Jesus said, it's time to move. It's daylight now. The light is calling. We'll head towards Judea.

He got to Bethany, and on his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had been in the tomb now for four days. So certainly he lingered for two days. He died sometime in that process—or we don't know how long Jesus really took—but he died in this waiting period, and he'd been in the tomb for four days.

One of the sisters came out to Jesus, and in her frustration, she accused Jesus of Lazarus' death. She said, "Lord,"—this is Martha—"if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Ever been mad at God? I have too.

"If you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Jesus responded simply, "Your brother will rise again."

"I know he will rise again," Martha said, "at the resurrection."

And then Jesus made a statement which has echoed down through history. He said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those that believe in me, though they die, yet shall they live. As a matter of fact, those that believe in me will never die." He said, "Do you believe this?"

And she said, "Yes, I believe that you are sent from God." But she didn't say she believed that...

Well, Mary, after hearing this—sitting inside—and Martha came in and told her that the teacher was out there. I don't know that Martha knew what to say back to Jesus, so she went in and got her sister. And Mary came running out to see Jesus. And the text says she fell at his feet and said the same thing to him.

The sisters must have been talking in the kitchen or something, saying to one another, "You know, if Jesus would have made it, Lazarus would still be alive."

And so Mary says to Jesus—"Lord, if you had been here," the very same thing Martha said, "my brother would not have died." And she was doing this in a weeping state.

And there were many people around who were weeping. These funerals would go on for days back then. And because Lazarus was so known, there were Jews from Jerusalem who were also there, as a large gathering.

And as Jesus saw all this weeping around him, the text says he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. And he asked, "Where have you laid him?"

"Come and see," they replied. "Come and see."

So I don't know the walk that it was from Lazarus' home—Mary and Martha's home—to the graveside. But as they're on their way to the tomb, we have the shortest inspired phrase in the Scriptures—what we know of as the shortest verse in the Bible. Of course, verses weren't inspired, but we have this quote about Jesus.

It simply says, on the way from Lazarus' home to the tomb:

Jesus wept.

He wept.

This word “wept” is not a simple “tears running down his eyes” type of weeping. This word in the Greek is the sense of deep sobbing—that sobbing where a person can't catch their breath.

This is—I want you to understand this—this is Almighty God in the flesh, in part of His creation, experiencing the curse of human rebellion against Him.

He's experiencing the pain and the suffering and the hurt of a heartache, of a world that He created perfectly, that He stepped into Himself, and is now experiencing the consequence of human rebellion in His own heart and soul.

And it simply says, He sobbed over what He was experiencing.

I don't know if you've ever felt this. I know a couple of years ago, in this month, I walked out of my younger brother's funeral—49 years old, died suddenly—and I walked out, and there was my uncle, my dad's brother, standing there. And it just came over me.

And I just fell upon my uncle. And I just started to heave and sob, and stuff was coming out. I'm assuming that's what was happening here with Jesus. He's experiencing the depth of pain and suffering in this world.

And then the text says this: Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. The tomb was a cave with a stone laid across it at an entrance. And he simply said, “Take the stone away.”

Now these stones were not movable by one person. And so this was a little bit of a project to remove a stone in front of a cave. And so it would have taken some work for some gentlemen.

So Martha intercedes again. She's not sure this is a very wise idea four days after Lazarus' passing. And so she says to Jesus—there she'd been walking with him to the tomb—she said, “Lord, by this time there's a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”

The Scripture tells us twice he's in this tomb for four days. She's right. You know, I don't know if you've ever been around a dead carcass that's been there for four days, but it smells. It really does. I grew up on a farm, and I have smelled this before.

I had a gentleman not long ago tell me about going into an RV park, and they hadn't seen a man for some time. And he went in, and he had passed away about four days earlier in his chair and was still sitting there.

She's right. There certainly had to be a bad odor in this tomb.

But Jesus, deeply moved in spirit, says to Martha, “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 up and said—now you have Jesus the Son praying to God the Father, as one God, communing with each other, talking in harmony with each other—Jesus says to God:

“I knew that you always hear me. I'm not praying this for my benefit, but I'm praying this in front of these people so that they may believe that you sent me.”

John's Gospel says, time and time again, we are called to believe what Jesus came and what Jesus did, and on believing, we'll have life in his name.

So they took away the stone. Jesus prayed, and after he was done praying, the Scripture says he called out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out. Lazarus, come out!”

And the dead man came out.

Don't you just love the Bible? I have been meditating on this text for over a month. That Jesus says, when he speaks, people are called out into life and life to the full.

I have been asking Jesus to call me out more into life, because I have come to believe that of all the voices in the world, there's really only one that matters. And that's the voice of God in our lives.

Everybody else was stumbling around, wondering what to do—in despair, in darkness, in disbelief, and in death. But when Jesus spoke, everything changed. The atmosphere started to adjust. People's spirits started to lift. Hope started to come back in the room. Life started to come into the souls. Anticipation started to resonate in the hearts of people.

People were being called out of darkness, out of disbelief, into the glorious light of the children of God.

The dead man came out.

Why keep doing church? Why keep gathering on a Sunday morning? Why keep opening the Word of God?

If you were to go to our website here at Nazareth, you would see that we believe something about the Bible. If you go to the tab of belief around the Bible, you would see that we believe that the Holy Bible is the divinely inspired, revealed, and inerrant Word of God. It's infallible, and it's authority over all matters of faith and life.

We also believe that God's Word is living and active. It's unfailingly powerful to accomplish God's will both now and forever. And God's Word is unchanging. It was the same a thousand years ago, two thousand years ago. It will never change. It will be the same a thousand years from now.

And it has the power to create, transform, and make and bring new life to people.

And why is the church growing? Why is the church persevering? Why is the church thriving in different places in the world?

Because the Word of God, inspired and empowered by the Spirit of God, continues to bring the people of God to life in the world. That's why we stay doing church.

The early church grew. Acts 15 tells us because the disciples were teaching and preaching—not their own opinion, not their own ideas—but the very Word of God.

Acts 19 tells us, as the Word of God went forth, it continued to spread widely. And listen to this: it grew in its power. It grew in its power.

This is where the power comes from.

The Word of God is the sword of the Spirit, and it divides the soul of human beings from their spirit so that they can be convicted of what's not of God and what is of God, and their spirit can begin to surge in the new life of Christ.

But all of this comes from the Bible. The truth comes from Jesus.

But it's not just that it brings life. There's more to this story.

The text says the dead man came out, but his hands and feet were still wrapped with strips of linen, and there were still grave clothes around his face. He's alive, but he's not free.

Another version says, "Out came the man who had been dead, his hands and feet tightly wrapped in burial clothes, with a burial cloth wrapped around his face."

They mummified dead bodies back then. And those mummified bodies—sometimes the legs were wrapped together, sometimes they were wrapped separate—but they tried to wrap the whole body and anoint it with spices and oil so that it wouldn't decay so quickly. It was just sort of a dignified way of burying the bodies.

And Lazarus, when he comes out of the tomb, he's alive, but he's not free.

And I just have to tell you that I feel alive in Christ, but if I'm honest with you, I don't always feel totally free. I long for a better day.

And I would suggest to you that all around this world, there are people who are spiritually dead, people who are spiritually alive, and then people on the journey at different levels of spiritual freedom in life.

And what we have here is—we have an illustration of what salvation is like. When a person is called by God out of death into life, out of darkness into light, out of condemnation into the glorious freedom of

the children of God, they're born again into the family of God through the Word of Jesus, through the Gospel of our God.

And then they begin to grow in sanctification and purification and freedom in their spirits and souls before Almighty God.

And this is what God is inviting us into.