

The Empty Tomb

But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre, 12 And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. John 20:11-12 KJV

And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go. John 11:43-44 KJV

It is a bit difficult to articulate my thoughts this morning. Last night in church, someone read the story of the resurrection of Jesus, from John 20. When we came to verses 11 and 12, I was struck by the thought of those angels sitting there where Jesus had lain, one at the head and the other at the feet. I thought about my struggles over the last months, and I had this longing that my tomb of discouragement, emotional despair, and fear would be empty by the power of Jesus, just like His was. And there the angels of God would testify of my freedom saying, “He is not here, he is risen.” What power, what freedom, what a desire! Is it possible? Is it possible that the one who died and rose again would also give the same power to me to conquer the death of my own fears and oppression? My heart cries out, longing to find that empty tomb in my life. I do not have the power by myself to overcome, but God, through His power, can deliver me.

My thoughts have also turned to the account of Lazarus, the friend of Jesus who died. It came to me in a little different light than I have thought of it before. What was it like to be dead in the tomb and hear the call of Jesus to come forth? Perhaps in his state of the dead, Lazarus heard God tell him that now it was time for him to go back, similarly to how people relate today about their out-of-the-body death experiences. Maybe it was like waking from a long sleep. Likely all of us have at one time or another been woken from a deep sleep and felt confused about what time of the day it is or what day it is. Maybe that is what it was like for Lazarus. He was dead, cold, in the tomb of death. There was no mistake, for he had been there for four days already. While Jesus tarried, he had succumbed to death. Then he hears the call, “Lazarus, come forth!” In an instant, he stirs, his heart begins to pump, his blood starts to flow, the cold feel of death leaves, and his feeling returns. He opens his eyes but is unable to see because of the cloth covering his face. He knows in an instant that it is the voice of Jesus. He feels the cold stone he is lying on, he feels his strength return, and he has one desire: to go to that voice, that voice that is calling him. He feels the restrictions of the grave clothes that his body is bound in. He cannot see with his face covered, but the grave clothes are loose enough for him to rise and shuffle his way out of the tomb. Through his wrapping, he is able to see light where the voice is coming from. Brighter and brighter the light shines through his grave clothes until at last, he stands amidst a group of people standing around the mouth of the tomb. Once again, he hears the voice of Jesus, “Loose him and let him go!” The people rush forward and begin to remove the grave clothes, astonished at what had just happened. They had just witnessed the greatest miracle of all; someone raised from the dead. There was no doubt; this Jesus had, with a command, made this dead man alive. The people pressed forward, all wanting to feel and touch this man who a few minutes ago was cold in death and was now alive, warm, and breathing.

Could this miracle be for me? I may not be altogether spiritually dead, but I may have areas of bondage in my life that need to be removed. I may have wrapped them in grave clothes and hidden them in the back corner of my mind. On the other hand, I may have areas in which I wish I had

freedom but feel powerless to be free. Maybe I am captivated by fear of man, or fear of what God will ask, or just fear of becoming or being vulnerable. This is real to me. I have my own fears and bondages that have kept me bound in my own tomb. It is cold in there, and the smell of death is everywhere, but I hear the call of Jesus, and he is calling, "Come forth!"

It is preposterous to think that Lazarus would have resisted that call, but sometimes that is what I do. I prefer to remain in the tomb of spiritual bondage instead of walking out into the sunshine of God's love. It may not be a physical choice. Perhaps bad things have happened that have shaped your emotional and mental health. Perhaps you have been hurt or misunderstood. Perhaps you have tried before. Perhaps freedom is in understanding God's grace, instead of being completely delivered from whatever has you bound. But the call is coming to me and to you, and it is to come forth into the sunshine of God's grace. Satan's bonds cannot hold those who choose to listen to the voice of God when he calls.

We may have lived in it so long that our bondage may not even be a conscious thought. It may not be a sin. People carry things from their past that affect the way they view life. I am not saying that everyone will find complete deliverance, but all of us can come to the light and the grace, and the healing that Jesus has to offer.

There is one more aspect of the story of Lazarus that we need to consider. When he came forth from the grave, he was still bound in his grave clothes. Why did they not fall off when he rose from the dead? Was there something in it for him and for the people to remove them from him? I think there was. As the people came to him to remove the clothes, it convinced them beyond a shadow of a doubt that the miracle was real. It brought them into a certain fellowship with Lazarus, his death, and his resurrection. It must have been comforting to Lazarus to feel the hands begin to remove the grave clothes that had him bound and dress him in his regular clothes. He would have felt their love, their joy, and compassion. Together they would have entered into the wonder of the miracle of Jesus.

Is this not an example for us today? It was true that Jesus brought Lazarus back from the dead, but it took his loved ones and friends to remove the grave clothes. God may do a work in our hearts, but he may use our brethren to help us become completely free. Not that they bring us back to life; that can only be the work of Jesus, but they can help us see the areas of bondage in our lives. Their prayers may set us free. Jesus ultimately does the work of life, but our brothers and sisters may be the ones who do the final work of setting us free. What freedom is may be different for each of us. For some, it may be a trust issue, for others, it may be fear, while others may be found in the grave clothes of pride, needing to be clothed instead with humility. Whatever the situation we find ourselves in, God wants us to be free.

If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed. John 8:36 KJV

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