

Back to life: John 11:1-45

How far had Lazarus traveled along the way of clarity, truth, and reality in those four days?

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [March 8, 2005](#) issue

I didn't want to come back. My consciousness hovered somewhere above the body lying on the gurney. It was all over, I thought. The last sensation I remembered had been incomprehensible pain, then a tunnel, and a grinding noise as described in other "near death experiences." But unlike other people who tell of "NDEs," I saw no lights, no angels, no dead relatives, no friendly saints; rather, I found myself very much awake in a weightless, imageless, gray hyperreality. I experienced a blessed clarity, freedom and relief, and a stunning sense of the illusory nature of the life I'd left behind.

Then the recovery room nurse enforced an alternative plan for my life. Someone was shaking my body and calling me by name. No! NO! Unprepared and inept, I slipped, as if falling on ice, into that lesser "reality" in a helpless panic of anguish and anger. Suddenly I was back in the confines of that little life of mine. Now I carried a memory of the futility of this "fake" life. It was as if I hadn't had time to drink the magic "forgetting potion" that makes you immune to truth. I came to consciousness disappointed, frustrated, unspeakably sad—and in excruciating pain.

How did Lazarus feel about coming back? How far had he traveled along the way of clarity, truth and reality in those four days? How deeply had he journeyed into eternal life? How transformed had he become as time and space separated soul from the prison of blood and bone and brain?

When Lazarus heard his name did he want to shout, "No! Not even for you, my friend and Master! Please, NO!" With what sense of contempt or ambivalence did he slip through his grave clothes into his body and back to his troubles? Could he have refused to respond?

That Jesus did not go into the tomb to touch him or shake him awake or draw him out puts the resolve upon Lazarus himself. Jesus stood outside calling. And Lazarus responded, now double-bound by winding sheet and by the limits of the old life. He brought himself out, burdened with the fetid grave clothes he would need again and the feeble body which would die again.

Unbind him and let him go, said Jesus. But go where? Home? Could Lazarus dwell contentedly at home again in the house of Mary and Martha? If you come from eternal life, how do you settle for anything less than eternal life? But Lazarus, the ultimate human witness to the way, the truth and the life, is called forth from eternal life . . . to mere everyday life. That is, in Johannine terms, to engage again in the ominous final struggle against the powers of darkness over the Light. And the world cannot bear the Light.

By a cruel irony, Jesus will be put to death because he brought Lazarus back to life. After the raising of Lazarus, the Sanhedrin gathers in that famous meeting where Caiaphas presents his troubling prophecy. Worried about the Roman occupiers and the attention drawn to Jesus by the people, they ask, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on thus, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all; you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish." So "from that day on they took counsel on how to put him to death" (John 11:47b-50, 53).

Aware of the threat, Jesus withdrew into hiding in Ephraim on the edge of the wilderness. But people kept coming to see Lazarus. So the chief priests planned to put him to death, because on account of him many were going away and believing in Jesus.

Double irony. Lazarus comes forth from death for death, this time not by disease but perhaps by the disturbed Sanhedrin—to be put to death for responding to life. Just as Jesus would be put to death for bringing forth life.

"See how he loved him!" said the crowd. Indeed, Lazarus is the type for the lovers of God, along with his quick-witted sister Martha and the intuitive Mary. Jesus' love for the family represents God's love for us. But the love we return is not without sacrifice. In small ways we practice dying: dying to sin, dying to shame, to

prejudices, opinions, stagnant ideas, dying to one old life and then another, ever striving toward new life. You consciously practice rising from whatever tomb you have holed yourself up in lately.

But practice only reminds us of the perfect sacrifice toward which we strive. We practice dying in prayer and asceticism not because we are afraid of death but because we are called forth to witness to an eternal life that is not contingent upon earthly life and death.

And as our practice increases, we can aspire to imitate St. Paul's confidence: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

A few hours after the recovery nurse shook me away from gray reality, another nurse put a beautiful but hungry infant boy into my arms. As I held his tightly wrapped body close to mine, my baby suddenly sensed proximity to the solution of his ravenous need. Instinctively, but not less miraculously, he grasped my breast to suckle.