

Unbound saints of God

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What's your favorite part of the Lazarus story? Is it the strange comfort Jesus offers Mary and Martha in their moment of grief: "Your brother will rise again"? Or is it Jesus' refusal to heed the warnings of the stench-filled tomb? Or maybe you focus on the comfort we are offered by Jesus, who wept at the tomb of his friend. For me, though, it's the very end of the story I like best.

As we listen to [John 11:32-44](#), we will hear three successive imperatives from Jesus, and, although our attention may naturally fall in the middle of that series, I'll suggest there's some theological benefit to seeing the three as a climactic progression that carries us to the end.

First, Jesus says, "Take away the stone."

Then, Jesus says, "Lazarus, come out!"

Finally, Jesus says, "Unbind him and let him go."

With the removal of the stone, dramatized by Martha's objection over the stench, Jesus invites possibility. Why would one bother to uncover a tomb? Because in Jesus there is an opportunity for new life. One doesn't roll the stone away unless one expects to find something other than a dead body. This first command is an invitation to accept that there is new possibility lying even in the supposedly smelly tomb.

With the command to Lazarus, Jesus reveals that possibility. We don't get to see what happens inside the dark resting place--whether the body is suddenly filled with breath or whether the eyes open first--but we hear those powerful words and see that Jesus has power over life and death. He speaks and even the dead hear his voice. Soon, emerging from the tomb, is the shroud-wrapped man--a sight that must astonish and frighten even the most resolute women and men looking on.

With the instruction to the onlookers, Jesus takes this miracle to its real conclusion. The bonds of death are to be loosened. The clothes of the grave are to be discarded. The tendrils that tie Lazarus to death itself are to be torn away. The crowd--family and friends--are told to do the unwrapping. They participate in the final setting free. As the Lord of life, Jesus calls Lazarus back from the dead, but the community takes part in the setting free--the celebration and reinitiation into the land of the living.

I think it is a mistake to ignore this final instruction or cast it aside as if it were merely an obvious conclusion to the story. Jesus' last command is what makes Lazarus's revivification real to his family and friends. Think of it this way: if a shroud-wrapped dead man came strolling out of a tomb, would you run up and hug him? Lazarus's new opportunity for life must be embraced by the community--otherwise he remains a zombie-like pariah. Jesus is completing the cycle by giving him back to those who love him. And I think there's a teaching here.

Keep in mind that Lazarus will eventually die again. I don't know when or how, but his resurrection isn't permanent. Jesus isn't raising him to new life in the same way he promises to bring us through the gate of death and into the life that awaits us. This is just a moment. It's a big moment and a powerful prefigurement of that resurrection that we're still waiting for, but it's not the true end of the story. Instead, this raising of Lazarus is an opportunity for more life--not new life. And what will the characteristics of the rest of his life look like? Well, ask someone who survived a near-death moment what the next morning felt like. As Brad Pitt's bizarre character from *Fight Club* explains after nearly killing a store clerk, "Tomorrow will be the most beautiful day of Raymond K. Hessel's life. His breakfast will taste better than any meal you and I have ever tasted."

Lazarus is unbound, and those who loosen the grave clothes participate in the what-comes-next. All of them are given a gift--deep, true, meaningful life. Jesus has entered their lives in a completely transformative way. Nothing will ever be the same. Jesus has shown them that death is not the end of the story--that, eventually, all of them will die and be raised again to new life. Because of that, the rest of this life is lived as though they had already been set free. The promise of new life gives freedom to this one. The resurrection breaks in here and now. We await new life in Jesus, but we are already set free in this one.

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