

Life after death (John 11:1-45)

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Less than three weeks before last Christmas, two beloved church members died within a day of each other. Suddenly, the season of hope, peace, joy, and love descended into darkness, disruption, pain, and grief. Instead of taking the road to Bethlehem's manger, we found ourselves at the foot of the cross preparing to march to the tomb.

Many of us know how quickly life can change forever. To make it through the first hours and days after shattering loss, we depend upon God's presence and responsive friends like oxygen. Hours after learning about a relative's heart attack and 800 miles from home, I sat dazed on my porch when a friend came over with a box of Dilly Bars. "These may not help, but they can't hurt!" she said. They didn't hurt at all, and her presence and prayers most definitely helped.

That's why I'm bothered by Jesus delaying his return to Bethany when he learns of Lazarus's death. Sure, he knows the endgame, but nobody else does. It's no time for cavalier omniscience. Are his tears at his friend's tomb prompted by regret?

But those who have passed through that lonesome valley do know, and are living witnesses to, the reality of life after death, albeit life transformed. In his commentary on this text at his Patheos blog, Bruce Epperly writes, "When Jesus proclaims, 'I am the resurrection and the life,' he is not denying the pain of death, but placing our pain in God's loving care. The cost of resurrection is death—the death of old ways, the death of the familiar, and the death of our previous identity."

When the bottom drops out of our world, I think most of us find ourselves preferring the old status quo. Often, we do not realize that when a life is lost, some things that are already dead drop away, too. My relative can never go back to the life he enjoyed before the heart attack took away his sense of invulnerability, his unmarred body (that now bears a six-inch scar from open heart surgery), and his taste for rich sauces and salty snacks. But he also hasn't gone back to the 70-hour work weeks, sleepless nights, and sedentism. He embraces life differently now, in the name of life itself.

This Lenten season, it's worth pondering the ways we might already be dead or dying—not to shame or scare ourselves but to better appreciate Christ's call to all of us to come forth from our tombs. In her commentary at *Journey With Jesus*, Century columnist Debie Thomas observes: "Yes, we are in death right now, but we serve a God who calls us to life. Our journey is not *to* the grave, but *through* it. The Lord who weeps is also the Lord who resurrects. So we mourn in hope."