The 7 Signs of Jesus | *The Raising of Lazarus*

John 11:1-46

Since 1982, there've been 76 medically verified cases of people spontaneously coming back to life after being pronounced legally *dead*—it's a phenomenon called, *The Lazarus Effect*.

Today, as we come to the seventh and final *Sign of Jesus* in John, we arrive at the climax of this collection of sign-stories: the tragic *death* and miraculous *raising* of *Lazarus*. John writes,

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. *(This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.)* (John 11:1-2)

John introduces our story's cast of characters by mentioning an event he hasn't yet told us about. Not until the *next* chapter do we get the story of Mary's prophetic act of worship—a foreshadowing of Jesus' own death. As the last of the four gospels, John assumes we know this story already, that a brief mention will bring Jesus' death into the foreground. John says Lazarus was from *Bethany* (meaning, the *House of Suffering*) and that he was suffering a grave illness.

The sisters sent word to Jesus, *"Lord, the one you love is sick."* (John 11:3)

Jesus had healed countless sick people, but this was *different*. Lazarus and his sisters weren't just *faces in a crowd*; They were like *family*. Lazarus was a dear and deeply loved *friend*. The word translated *sick* here is the Greek, *astheneó*—literally, *powerlessness*. In the Bible, it can refer to everything from *physical illness*, *moral weakness*, *emotional brokenness* to *spiritual deadness*. It's every conceivable form of human limitation gathered up into a single word. See, Lazarus didn't just have the *flu*; he was experiencing a total *power-failure*. Jesus' friend is *dying*.

Have you ever gotten that news? That *text* or *phone call*? Someone you *love* is *astheneó*. In the hospital, off the wagon, headed for bankruptcy, divorce, or *worse*. It can leave *you* feeling *powerless* as well. It happened to us on a Friday morning—March 31st, 2023. Sarah-Jade and I

had just arrived in Mono, Ontario for a weekend retreat. We were grabbing coffee when her phone rang. The second she answered, I knew it was *that* kind of call. Her brother, *Chase*, had been found unconscious and was in the ICU. We didn't know then that he would never again regain consciousness. Before Sarah had even hung up, I'd already cancelled our plans and turned the car around. We headed straight to the hospital. That's what you do when someone you love is *astheneó*. *Nothing else matters.* But strangely,

When [Jesus] heard that Lazarus was sick, he ***stayed where he was two more days***. (John 11:6)

Two days. When tragedy strikes, minutes can feel like hours, but *two days* is an *eternity*! That's *two days* for Lazarus' condition to worsen. *Two days* for Mary and Martha to be without the comfort of their friend and rabbi. *Two days* without Jesus' healing touch. What was so important he couldn't just cancel his plans, turn the car around, and rush to Lazarus' side?

Have you ever reached out to Jesus in a crisis, only to feel like he's dragging his feet? You pray *desperately*, you need a miracle *now*, but Jesus seems to be taking his sweet time. How do we process when God's timing doesn't line up with ours? When prayers bounce off the ceiling and it feels like God just doesn't care? It's commonly explained that Jesus delayed to purposely let Lazarus die, to set up the subsequent miracle. Aside from being a heartless explanation, the math doesn't add up. Even with a two-day delay and a full travel-day, Jesus arrives to find his friend has been dead *four* days. In other words, by the time he got the news, Lazarus was gone already. Jesus' delay didn't *cause* Lazarus' death; it simply *postponed* the miracle. Jesus explains,

This sickness *will not* ***end in death***. It is so that God's Son may be glorified through it.** (Jn 11:3)

Jesus tells his disciples that death won't get the final word in Lazarus' story; that through this tragedy God's glory will be revealed. Which sounds *great* but, as they're quick to point out, Jesus has an even *bigger* problem—*another* life-and-death *matter* at hand. Nervously, they ask,

"Rabbi, a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?" (v.8)

In the preceding story, Jesus was celebrating Hanukkah in *Jerusalem* when, upon hearing his words, ***"his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him"*** (10:31). He narrowly escaped with his life. To go now to Bethany—*less than two miles* from Jerusalem—meant certain death. But Jesus was determined to go, even if love would mean laying down his own life for his friend.

Thomas said to the disciples, *"Let us also go, that we may die with him."* (John 11:16)

It's unclear if this is *pessimism* or *courage* in the face of death; either way, Jesus was off to Bethany to confront death head on. But before seeing *Lazarus*, he'd have to face *the sisters*.

In the Bible, Mary and Martha are portrayed as having very different personalities. As Jesus arrives, *Martha—the activist*—runs to confront Jesus; doesn't even let him put his bags down first. While *Mary—the contemplative*—goes internal, processing privately. Eventually, both sisters express their shared disappointment and anger with Jesus. Their grievance is clear:

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (John 11:21, 32)

If only you'd been here. If only. I don't know how many *if-onlys* I've had with Chase's death. If only we'd *been* there or been more *there for* him. If only we hadn't missed his call that morning. If only we hadn't left town or had invited him to join us. We don't blame ourselves for what happened, but it's easy to imagine redirecting these *if-onlys* at the one person who could have intervened. In their grief, Mary and Martha let Jesus have it and they don't hold back.

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the [Jewish community] who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. (John 11:33)

Notice, Jesus doesn't get defensive, he doesn't correct or scold or tell them that blaming him won't bring Lazarus back. And he doesn't start *God*-splaining how *everything happens for a reason* (which *isn't* true). Instead, he simply empathizes, feels, absorbs their pain into himself.

If you've experienced grief, you know how hurtful even well-meaning words can be. People try to assign *meaning* to our pain, urge us to *look on the bright side*, or tell us to *move on*, that *moping around won't do us any good*. But grief doesn't need *fixing, explaining*, or *cheering up*. The ancient Jewish custom being practiced by the people John says were weeping along with the sisters is called, *Sitting Shiva*—a seven-day ritual of accompanying someone in their grief. You don't talk; you just sit there, *with* the person. Present to their pain.

Modern Western culture tends to *avoid* grief. Rather than sitting in it, staring at it, being present to our and each other's pain, we treat grief, as psychotherapist *Francis Weller* writes in, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, as a *problem to solve* either with *amnesia* or *anesthesia*. We try to *forget* our pain—*keep busy, distracted, denying anything bad has happened*—or *self-medicate* to avoid feeling anything at all. Avoidance, he writes, can trap grief in our bodies, burying it deep down where it can lead to prolonged depression, isolation, and numbness. In *her* book, *It's OK That You're Not OK*, Megan Divine describes another form of grief-avoidance: *looking for a silver lining*, *putting a positive spin on it*, treating *pain* as a *lesson*. But pain isn't a *problem to solve*. Loss isn't a lesson. Grief, something you *get over*. Because grief is an expression of *love*.

In a now infamous blog post from 2014, writer Jamie Anderson writes,

> Grief, I've learned, is really love. All the love you want to give but cannot give. All that unspent love gathers in the corners of your eyes and the part of your chest that gets empty and hollow. The happiness of love turns to sadness when unspent. *Grief is just love with no place to go.*

Mary and Martha's love for Lazarus now had no place to go. But in their grief, Jesus was *with* them, embodying Psalm 34:18, which says, ***"The Lord is close to the broken-hearted."*** God draws near to be with us in our pain because God knows what it is to be broken-hearted. And as Jesus visits Lazarus' grave, he is struck with more than just *second-hand* grief. John writes,

Jesus wept. Then the [other mourners] said, *"See how he loved him!"* (John 11:34-36)

The Bible's shortest verse is perhaps one of its most profound—*Jesus wept*. This isn't just a single tear trickling symbolically down his otherwise stoic face; this is sobbing uncontrollably. *Ugly crying*. There's an old hymn we used to sing, *"He had no tears for his own grief but sweat drops of blood for mine."* While these lyrics recognize Jesus' selfless empathy, they're not only *not true*; they fail to recognize something profoundly important about Jesus. As God in human form, Jesus reveals God's *humanity*, God as a *personal* being with real *feelings*, someone who experiences real *emotion, grief*, and *pain* over the tragedies of our world. Jesus isn't simply moved with compassion *for our* grief—on our *behalf*; he sheds buckets of tears of *his own* grief. And his tears don't just reveal his *humanity*; they reflect his *divinity*. This is our God; this is who he is; He loves us. And the God who *loves*, the God who grieves *alongside*, also weeps.

If you're grieving today, Jesus not only cares *about* your pain; he's *in pain* right there *with* you. What's more, Jesus not only comes near with comfort and solidarity; he offers *hope*.

Jesus said to Martha, *"Your brother will rise again."* she answered, *"I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."* (John 11:23-24)

Martha is expressing her belief in the ancient Jewish hope of *resurrection* with a phrase that may feel *foreign* to *our* way of talking about the afterlife. *Rising again in the resurrection at the last day*. Most Christians will subconsciously unscramble her meaning to be something like, *"I know I'll see him again in heaven one day."* But that's *not* what she says. Strange as *her* way of describing the afterlife may be to *us*, a Jewish person in Jesus' Day would be just as confused by *our* idea of *going to heaven when you die*. That's just not how people in the Bible understood *life after death*. See, the Bible envisions reality as a two-part timeline. It has different ways of describing these two parts, but they're most commonly referred to as the *Present Age* (that is, the age in which you and I and everyone ever has lived) and the *Age to Come*. Judaism teaches

that, when a person dies, they enter a peaceful state of *waiting*—waiting for the *Age to Come*, at which point the Messiah will bring an end to sin, evil, and death and bring about the renewal of all things, including raising God's people—all who've lived in the *present* age—to *eternal* life (another term for the *Age to Come*) giving them brand-new, resurrection bodies to reign over a new creation. Isaiah saw it as, ***"a new heavens and a new earth."*** (Is 65:17) where the weapons of this age are melted down and remade into gardening tools to cultivate a new, global Garden of Eden, a world filled with God's glory, where the Spirit's breathes life into all things and the Messiah's love is fully *received* by all, fully *returned* in worship by all, and fully *expressed* to all.

This is the ancient Jewish hope of *life after death*—actually, a 3-step process of *life in this present age*, then after death, *a period of waiting*, and finally *the resurrection of our bodies in the Age to Come* and participation in the eternal kingdom of God. N.T. Wright cleverly refers to the hope of *Resurrection* as life *after* life-after-death. By contrast, he points out that the Bible never talks about going to heaven when you die; the Resurrection happens here, in the world God so loves, the world we were born for, an eternal *earthly* kingdom. This is what Martha was talking about—*Lazarus rising again in the resurrection at the last day*. This is the very same hope the early church and New Testament authors understood as having been realized in *Jesus*.

But here's where things get *really wild*. Neither Martha nor any ancient Israelite had any category for a *resurrection* in the *Present Age*. Jesus was about to break all her categories.

Jesus said to her, *"I AM the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."* (John 11:25-26)

By calling *himself* the Resurrection, Jesus is making at least *two* radical claims: He's saying that *resurrection* isn't just a *theoretical idea* about the *afterlife*; it's a *reality* embodied in a *person*—in *him*. That eternal life isn't found in having the right *beliefs,* but in being connected

to the right *person*—the source of *life itself*. He's *also* saying that *resurrection* is no longer just a *future* hope; it's breaking surprisingly into this *present age*—eternity *now*. That's the *real* shock. Jesus was bringing the *future* resurrection into the *present tense*. And it wasn't just a *claim*; he was about to prove that something elemental was about to shift in the very fabric of reality.

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. *"Take away the stone,"* he said. *"But, Lord,"* said Martha, the sister of the dead man, *"by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."* (John 11:38-39)

Jewish custom was to wait three days to embalm a body to ensure the deceased was *dead*, not just unconscious or in a coma. But because of the *delay*, it was already Day Four and the body would already be decomposing, well beyond hope of resuscitation. But Jesus insists.

So, they took away the stone. Jesus called in a loud voice, *"Lazarus, come out!"* The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, *"Take off the grave clothes and let him go."* (John 11:41-44, *selected*)

Before going straight to more *explanation*, let's take a moment for *adoration*. This really happened! And it's a huge moment, not just in the gospels, but in human history! *Glory to God!*

Now, we do need to make some important clarifications here. Theologians differentiate between *resuscitation* and *resurrection*. Basically, *resuscitation* is coming *back from the dead*—entering the tunnel, seeing the light at the end of it, and going *back* to where you came from. Stories like this are *rare* but *real*. Now, the *Lazarus Effect* occurs within 5-10 minutes of CPR being stopped, and the vast majority who experience it die again within hours. Resuscitation—*and full recovery* after *four days*—is a bona fide *miracle*. Still, as miraculous as it was, this is still technically a *resuscitation*. Jesus brought Lazarus *back* from the dead, *back* to the same life he had before—a body still subject to *disease*, *death,* and decay. In time, Lazarus would die *again*.

Resurrection, though, isn't coming *back* from the dead; it's going *through* the tunnel and out the other side. Jesus is the only example (so far) of true *resurrection*. We see the difference

in John's mention of the grave clothes. When Lazarus comes out of his tomb, he's still wrapped in strips of linen, unable to remove them himself. But on Easter Sunday, in Jesus' empty tomb,

> **…the strips of linen were lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen.** (John 20:6-7)

This isn't the hastily discarded laundry of a man groggily waking up from a coma, fighting to get free. And it's not the forensic evidence of grave robbers stealing a body to invent a myth. Jesus removes his own grave clothes, neatly folding them in an unhurried, non-anxiously way because he wasn't frantically struggling to escape a prison cell; he was walking out of the grave the same way he went in—of his own free will, intentionally executing a plan.

The *resuscitation of Lazarus* is a *sign* pointing to the *resurrection of Jesus*—an event that breaks all the categories, signaling that the life of the *Age to Come* is available in the *Present Age* to us. It's more than just the *Lazarus Effect*; it's the power of Christ to *affect* everything!

Jesus is calling us, *like Lazarus*, to come out of our tombs—tombs of *endless pleasure-seeking, empire-building, pride and power, sin* and *shame*; to be free of the grave clothes of *religious rule-keeping* and *self-help*. Jesus has come to *our* House of Suffering, calling us by name us to *rise* and *come forth*, to wake up to a life fueled by resurrection power—a shift that doesn't just affect us *personally*; it affects us *economically*, *politically*, *relationally*… Jesus taught,

> **When you host a dinner party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they can't repay you, *<u>you will be repaid at the resurrection</u>*.** (Lk 14:13-14)

Notice Jesus uses the word *repaid*, not *reward*. He's not saying good works on earth are *rewarded* in *heaven*; he's describing how when we invest in God's Kingdom in this *present age*, those investments continue to pay off in the *age to come*. *What we do in life echoes in eternity.* Like *seeds* planted in *hope,* living the Jesus Way *today* will bear fruit in the eternal *tomorrow*. That's the difference between hoping for *"heaven when you die"* and *"awaiting resurrection at*

the last day." Heaven-when-you-die has no real use for *this* world, other than helping people get their ticket *out*. If you're *only passing through*, you might as well wipe mud on the carpet as you go. But if our hope is in *new creation*, everything we do here matters—*our daily choices, the friendships we forge and parties we throw, how we spend our time, money, and talent, the grace we extend, the love we express*—these are the ingredients out of which God will build eternity.

The 7th Sign of Jesus is a sign pointing to the ultimate miracle of Jesus' *resurrection*, itself a sign that, in him, the ancient hope of eternal life has broken into our present-day reality; That God's love outlasts even death and that hope that's more powerful than despair. As the Apostle Paul wrote, when we lose our loved ones, ***"we do not grieve as those who have no hope."*** (1 Thess 4:13) Not pie-in-the-sky *heaven-when-you-die* hope but hope grounded in the proven power of *resurrection*. And while we don't *grieve as those who have no hope*, this story reminds us that we don't *hope as those who have no grief*. Jesus shows that, even though we know how the story *ends*, and even though the story's end has at least partially broken into our world, the hope of resurrection never minimizes our pain and suffering. Love with nowhere to go hurts—*plain and simple*. And while we'd love for our loved ones *back—resuscitated*—because of Jesus we can set our sights even higher; not on temporary *resuscitation*, but in eternal *resurrection*.

This is the gospel. Jesus is *alive—resurrection is real*—and there's a whole new creation out there. Jesus calling us to come out of our tombs, to in community help remove each other's grave clothes, and step into a new reality, embodying *the life of the eternal age* in our *everyday lives*. And if you want to experience *that* kind of *Lazarus Effect* in *your* life, the invitation from Jesus is simple: *Come forth* and *come alive!*

Let's pray.