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## Not Rewriting Lazarus' Story

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## Not Rewriting Lazarus' Story

### **Abstract**

In this sermon, the author considers Jesus' raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-45). Focusing on the awkwardness of Jesus' deliberate delay in coming, the sermon asks whether rewriting the incident to make Jesus appear more caring is advisable. No, rewriting the incident would undercut three lessons in the story as written. First, Jesus' chief concern was with God and his glory. Second, Jesus revealed more about himself, namely, "I am the resurrection and the life." Third, Jesus wanted to deepen the faith of Lazarus' family, friends, and his disciples then and since.

### **About the Author**

Dr. Jackie Smallbones is a native of South Africa and an ordained minister in the Reformed Church of America. She teaches biblical studies, Christian education, and Christian spirituality at Northwestern. She is the author of *Keeping Company with Jesus: Reflections on Gospel Stories* (Augsburg Books, 2005) and *Knit Together: Many Colors, One Life* (2014). She also has written articles for *Christian Education Journal* and *Church Herald*. She occasionally presents seminars and leads retreats on such topics as teaching, Christian spirituality and spiritual disciplines. Prior to joining Northwestern's faculty, she taught at a college and seminary in South Africa.

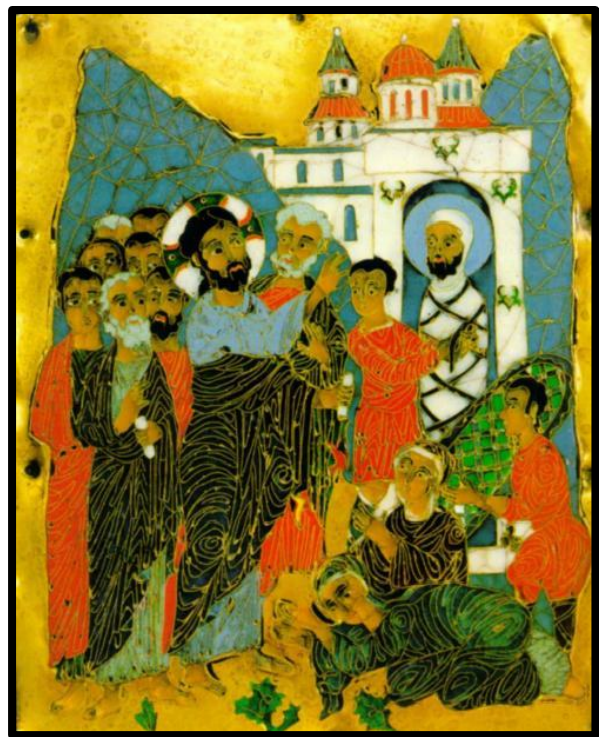
## **Not Rewriting Lazarus’ Story** John 11:1-45

by Jackie Smallbones, Th. D.

For a number of reasons I thought about rewriting this story of Lazarus. First, it’s way too long, taking nearly eight minutes to read the entire story out loud. Few people today are able to pay attention that long, not because they don’t want to, but because they’re just not accustomed to concentrating for more than a few seconds at a time. My version would be brief.

Second, I would like to omit the bit that makes Jesus seem, well, to be honest, just a little uncaring. John’s account makes a big deal about the love between Jesus and the three siblings Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. And yet John writes, “Though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was”

(vv 5-6). It seems to me that if you love your friends and they call to you for help in a desperate



**“Resurrection of Lazarus,” 12<sup>th</sup> century enamel work from Georgia.**

Image from Wikimedia Commons.

situation, you drop everything and rush to their aid. Jesus deliberately delayed his journey to Bethany and, as a result, Lazarus died and Mary and Martha experienced untold suffering and grief. This isn’t exactly a very attractive picture of Jesus. I’m not sure that it would be very acceptable today. I’d leave it out.

So I made an attempt at rewriting the story to make Jesus attractive to others. Here goes:

Once upon a time there was a man, Lazarus, who lived with his sisters Mary and Martha in the village of Bethany, not far from Jerusalem. Lazarus was ill and dying. The two sisters sent an urgent message to their friend, Jesus. ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill.’ Now Jesus really loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, therefore, as soon as he received the message he jumped on a horse (borrowed from someone, of course), rode through the night (Paul Revere style), arriving just in time to restore Lazarus to full health and keep him from death. Everyone praised God with great joy, thankful they had averted further suffering. And they all lived happily ever after.

I think my version of the story would be good news for my seven-year-old great-nephew and his parents. He loves to read and is good at it. He told his dad his hobby is reading. Recently he was diagnosed with a very serious eye problem that could mean blindness in the near future. His parents are anxiously waiting for more tests, hoping for better news. They know that Jesus loves them. Don’t you think they would want him to rush in and heal their seven-year-old?

My version of the story would also be good news for my friend who is suffering with liver failure and isn’t eligible for a transplant, my 90-year-old friend who lost her husband and home in the same week, and my neighbor who has inoperable terminal cancer. No doubt, you can think of many others who might just like my version of the story because it gives a picture of

a Savior who is quick to rescue people and heal them before things get any worse. My story makes Jesus look good. No one will be disappointed with this Jesus.

The trouble is, that’s not the way it happened and my edited version has omitted the best part of the story—Jesus’ amazing miracle of bringing a man back to life after being dead and buried for four days. More than that, in omitting the part where Jesus deliberately disappoints his friends, it also leaves out the possibility of learning the lessons embedded in this story, lessons that lead to deeper faith in Jesus because they bring hope and comfort to all God’s people. John left in all the details because he saw a much bigger picture, so easy for us to miss. I see three lessons revealed in John’s longer version that help explain why Jesus delayed and can lead us to a deeper faith in Jesus regardless of what life throws at us.

The first lesson has to do with Jesus’ chief concern—God and his glory. When Martha and Mary’s message about Lazarus’ illness reached Jesus, he said, “This illness does not lead to death [obviously not thinking of physical death since Lazarus did die]; rather *it is for God’s glory*, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (v 4). For this reason, he didn’t drop what he was doing and rush to Bethany. Jesus was willing to risk his reputation and the love of his friends so that God’s glory would be revealed. Where God’s glory is, the very presence of God is personally experienced.

Later in the story Jesus again referred to God’s glory. As he stood outside Lazarus’ tomb with the sisters and a large crowd referred to as “the Jews,” he commanded them to remove the stone. Martha protested, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days”

(v 39). Jesus reminded her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, *you would see the glory of God?*” (v 40) This is the amazing part. Jesus wanted Martha to have the incredible experience of actually seeing the glory of God and thus experiencing God’s very real presence with her. He purposely delayed his journey to Bethany, allowing the process of decay to make steady progress on that dead body, because he knew and desired that glory would go to God and the family would experience his glory. This would never have happened with a quick-fix healing miracle. Lazarus’ death, along with his sister’s grief, was more glorifying to God than healing and rescue from further pain. I’ll confess I find that difficult to hear, much less understand.

Second, because of Lazarus’ death, Martha (and all who today read John’s Gospel) learned a new truth about Jesus and her faith, as a result, was significantly strengthened. As soon as Martha heard that Jesus had finally arrived, albeit too late, and was just outside their village, she went out to meet him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha’s first words were somewhat accusatory: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Then she seems to hint, big time, “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Jesus, offering no apology, making no excuses, ignored her hint, merely responding, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha is a good theologian and assumes Jesus is thinking about the distant future and not the immediate moment and so replies, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” But Jesus had something greater in view and reveals to Martha an entirely new truth about himself, one that is radical. “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in

me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (vv 21-25).

The resurrection is the Christian hope. It’s not a hope we should reserve exclusively for funerals or times of severe suffering. It is the hope we all have now in Christ Jesus. The resurrection is what we look forward to and long for. Resurrection, newness and fullness of life in Jesus, now and for all eternity, is what Christianity is all about and where we’re all headed. Thanks to John’s version of the story, not my abbreviated one, we have this new truth and the hope it gives us.

Thirdly, in the bigger picture view, all of this happened, writes John, so that “you may believe” (v 15). Jesus intentionally delayed his trip to Bethany, not only for God’s glory and the revelation of a new truth about himself, but also to deepen faith in Jesus.

This is what Jesus said to his disciples at the beginning of the story. He informed them that Lazarus was asleep and he was going to Bethany to awaken him. They were slow to realize that Lazarus had died, misunderstanding Jesus’ use of the word sleep, so he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe” (v 15). This probably puzzled them a bit, since they were following Jesus because they already believed in him. Jesus knew this and also knew that, like all disciples, their faith needed to increase, becoming unshakeable. Interestingly, in the story we’re not told whether Lazarus’ resurrection did deepen their faith. I think we can presume it did. However, we are told of the faith responses of two others.

First, Martha. When Jesus revealed to her that he was the resurrection and the life, he also asked her the challenging question: “Do you believe this?” Martha responded with the boldest and most complete personal statement of belief in all of the Gospels, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world” (v 27). Had Jesus not delayed, had Lazarus not died, had Mary and Martha not experienced grief and disappointment with Jesus, Martha might never have discovered the depth of her faith and might never have so boldly testified to it. We might never have gotten this bold statement from a woman to assure us that the woman’s place is indeed in proclamation of the Gospel.

Second, some of the Jews gathered at the tomb believed. Because Bethany was close to Jerusalem, many of the Jews went to console the two sisters about their brother and were eye witnesses of Lazarus restoration to life. In John’s Gospel, the category “the Jews” is usually a reference to the religious leaders, a group of people who were mostly antagonistic towards Jesus, and sometimes anyone who rejected Jesus. Who these Jews were and what their relationship with the three siblings was remains unclear. All we know is what John wrote: “Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him” (v 45).

So, in the end, I think I won’t seek a publisher for my edited version of the story! I still don’t fully understand why suffering, grief, and pain exist. However, I do understand that there is a bigger picture, one in which the glory of God matters more than anything else; one where we may discover again life-changing truths about our Savior, Jesus Christ so that, with Martha we



can respond to Jesus in our own bold statement of faith: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Do you believe this?