

# COME OUT OF YOUR CAVE!

## John 11:1-44

*In the midst of death, Jesus brings life.*

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Without a doubt, one of the most dramatic days in our American history was September 11, 2001. Many stories of courage and compassion have come out of that terrible tragedy. At the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., a hijacked jet crashed into the building, killing 64 passengers on board and 125 people in the building itself. Officer Isaac Hoopii saw the plane crash into the building, and he immediately began helping people straggle out of the rubble. As the fire raged, Hoopii went back into the building time and again, wearing nothing but his uniform—no mask, no protective gear whatsoever. Somebody yelled at him to stop, but he shouted back, “We gotta get the people!”

Suffocating from smoke, Hoopii could hear the building cracking. He yelled down a pitch-black hallway, “Anybody in here? Anybody here?”

Inside, six co-workers were crawling through the smoke and the rubble and had lost all sense of direction. When they heard Hoopii’s voice, they cried out, and Hoopii responded, “Head toward my voice! Head toward my voice!”

Following the sound of his voice, all six trapped people made it out of the crumbling building to safety.<sup>1</sup> It was a death-to-life experience.

Without a doubt, one of the most dramatic days in the life of Jesus was the day he raised Lazarus from the dead. I’ve often wondered what Lazarus experienced during those four days he was in the tomb before Jesus called him out. What did he think when he heard the voice of Jesus calling him back from the dead? Was he happy? Was he thankful? Was he angry? Did he realize that God had a greater purpose in all of this?

That’s what Jesus said when he was made aware that his friend Lazarus was sick: “*This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.*”<sup>2</sup> Something else was afoot here, something bigger going on. As usual, the disciples didn’t understand what Jesus was saying. They couldn’t understand why they stayed where they were for two more days. Then, all of a sudden, Jesus announced they were going back to Judea, to Bethany, the home of Lazarus. The disciples were fairly uncomfortable with this, because Bethany was just outside Jerusalem, and the last time they had gone near Jerusalem, they had barely escaped with their lives. But Jesus

was going, so they were, too. Thomas, always the pessimist, said, “Let’s all go, so we can die with him.”

By the time Jesus got to Bethany, Lazarus had been dead four days. This was a significant detail because the Jews of that time believed the spirit of a person stayed with the body for three days. In other words, Lazarus was completely dead and gone.

There was a big grieving session going on, but when Martha, the sister of Lazarus—the sensible, responsible one—heard Jesus was coming, she ran out to meet him. Immediately she laid the guilt on him: “Jesus, if you had been here, Lazarus would not have died.” But then with hope in her voice, she said, “Yet even now, I know God will give you whatever you ask of him (like, for instance, making my brother live).”

Jesus said, “Your brother will rise again.” (Meaning, like in 10 minutes.)

Martha misunderstood and said, “I know that; everyone will rise again at the resurrection on the day of the Lord.” That was the common belief.

But then Jesus said something very surprising. Try to hear these familiar words through the ears of Martha, as if for the first time. Jesus said, “*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.*”<sup>3</sup> Then he looked at her straight in the eyes and asked, “Do you believe this?”

Martha didn’t know quite what to say; how could a person be the resurrection? She replied, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” It didn’t really answer the question, but it was sufficient.

Then Martha ran back to get Mary, her sister—the sensitive, spiritual one. Everyone who was at the house grieving followed them out to the place where Jesus was. Mary just lost it when she saw Jesus; she flung herself at his feet and cried out, “Lord, if you had only been here, Lazarus would still be alive!”

It was more than Jesus could take. His friends Martha and Mary, so distraught over the loss of their brother, all the people gathered around weeping and wailing—it just broke his heart. So he asked them to take him to the tomb, and when he saw the stark reality of the death of Lazarus, Jesus had a very human, very compassionate moment. He wept for his friend.

When he regained his composure, Jesus stood before the cave and ordered, “Take away the stone.”

Martha protested, “Lord, the smell!”

Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone, and Jesus said a prayer, and then he shouted, “LAZARUS! COME OUT!” There was not a breath taken in the whole crowd as they waited. Suddenly a bandaged hand gripped the side of the cave, and Lazarus stepped out, still wrapped in the burial garments, his face still covered. The Scripture doesn’t say what the immediate reaction of the crowd was, but I’m guessing it was pandemonium. Women fainting, men screaming, children crying, people running in every direction—just imagine yourself at a graveside service, and all of a sudden the casket pops open, the dead person sits up and then crawls out of the coffin! What would *you* do? Like the calm at the eye of the storm, Jesus instructed his disciples, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

This is such a great event in the life of Jesus. One reason it is so fascinating is that it functions on several levels. Of course, it is the story about the raising of Lazarus from the

dead, perhaps the greatest miracle Jesus ever performed. I'm sure nobody present ever forgot it!

But this story is also a story about Jesus. For one thing, it shows the compassionate heart of Jesus. Even knowing what he was about to do, he was overcome with emotion at the sorrow of his friends. His heart weeps for us when we are sad and broken-hearted.

This story also tells us how the wheels start turning to have Jesus arrested and crucified. Some of the people who saw Lazarus raised went straight to the Pharisees and reported what Jesus had done. From this point on, the Jewish leaders were intent on having him killed.

The action of the story—a death and resurrection—foreshadows what will happen to Jesus in a matter of days. Remember, Jesus said he would be glorified through Lazarus. In the Gospel of John, the term “glorification” refers to the crucifixion of Jesus. So there is a double meaning here. When Jesus says that through the illness of Lazarus, the Son of God would be glorified, he was speaking of his own death and resurrection.

Finally, we learn about Jesus in this story that he truly is the Lord of life and death. Not only is he a great teacher, shepherd, rabbi, and leader. He actually has power over the elemental forces of the universe—life and death. He is the Son of Man and the Son of God, the Word, the Christ. In the other Gospels, Jesus raises two others from the dead, but this is the only resurrection miracle in John, and it is the climax of the mighty acts of Jesus.

But there's another level to this story as well. The story of Lazarus is a story about us. We are Lazarus, trapped in the ways of death. We can also be Lazarus, raised to new life by Jesus. In Christ, we, too, can be glorified.

There is a line in our funeral service that I use to open the part of the service that we do by the graveside: “In the midst of life, we are in death.” And we are, aren't we? Death surrounds us, every day we are alive—people dying at the end of a long life, young people being killed, tragedies taking lives, war claiming victims. We almost get numb to it, until it happens to someone we love.

There are also the different types of living death: the spiritual death of addictions or sinful lifestyles, the emotional death of divorce and severed relationships, the despair and hopelessness of poverty. There is no ignoring it.

There is only one thing that overcomes death; it's resurrection in Jesus Christ. Whatever form of death you happen to be dealing with today, whatever physical or emotional or spiritual cave entombs you, Jesus stands outside and calls, “Come out! Come out, and live!” You can be unbound and set free. Whatever the illness, Jesus is the cure. Whatever the despair, Jesus is the hope. Whatever the death, Jesus is the life that overcomes.

We begin to experience the eternal life of Christ in this life when we establish a personal relationship with him. He gives us abundant life here on earth, a foretaste of the incredible glory we will experience when we are resurrected into heaven. Living in Jesus makes a difference, not just for eternity, but for today.

When Christ has given you life, you (and others) can tell the difference. Dr. Lee Strobel, an award-winning journalist, author, and pastor, tells about his daughter Allison, who was five years old when Lee left behind a lifetime of atheism and became a believer. All Allison had ever known was an angry and profane father, a dad who one time came home so mad he kicked a hole in the wall. She would hide in her room until she could tell what kind of mood Lee was in.

But five months after Lee gave his heart to Christ, Allison went to her mom and said, “Mommy, I want God to do for me what he’s done for Daddy.” She didn’t know all the information about Christianity. She just knew that her daddy used to be that way, and now he was this way. He used to be angry and bitter and violent; now he was gentle and loving and peaceful. If that’s what God did to people, she wanted to sign up, right then and there. She wanted the abundant life in Christ that she saw in her father.<sup>4</sup>

Having lived the abundant life, then when death does come, we know it’s not the end. Death is a transition from earthly life to heavenly life. We live by the power of God now; we will live in the presence of God when we die.

Country music icon Johnny Cash grew up in Arkansas with an older brother named Jack. Johnny, or J. R., as they called him, adored his big brother, who was smart and kind and had already declared that he wanted to go into pastoral ministry. But at the age of 15, Jack had a terrible accident when he was pulled into a power saw while cutting logs to support the family. He lingered near death for a few days in the hospital, but finally the family was all called in to say good-bye. Johnny bent over Jack’s bed and kissed him on the cheek and said, “Good-bye, Jack.” His mother and father were kneeling beside the bed, praying in tears. Suddenly about 6:30 in the morning, Jack opened his eyes and had a moment of lucidity. Johnny described it in his autobiography:

He opened his eyes and looked around and said, “Why is everybody crying over me? Mama, don’t cry over me. Did you see the river?”

And she said, “No, I didn’t, son.”

“Well,” he said, “I thought I was going toward the fire, but I’m headed in the other direction now, Mama. I was going down a river, and there was fire on one side and heaven on the other. I was crying, ‘God, I’m supposed to go to heaven. Don’t you remember? Don’t take me to the fire.’ Then all of a sudden I turned, and now, Mama, can you hear the angels singing?”

She said, “No, son, I can’t hear it.”

And he squeezed her hand and shook her arm, saying, “But Mama, you’ve got to hear it.” Tears started rolling off his cheeks, and he said, “Mama, listen to the angels. I’m going there, Mama.”

We listened with astonishment. “What a beautiful city,” he said. “And the angels singing. Oh, Mama, I wish you could hear the angels singing.” Those were his last words. And he died.<sup>5</sup>

Then Johnny Cash added these words: “The memory of Jack’s death, his vision of heaven, the effect his life had on the lives of others, and the image of Christ he projected have been more of an inspiration to me, I suppose, than anything else that has ever come to me through any man.”<sup>6</sup>

What a life to live for! What a life to look forward to! I want to go there, too; don’t you?

So how do we get there? It’s simple enough: believe in Jesus Christ. Trust him as your Savior. Accept his grace by faith. Live in relationship with him. Just believe. From the beginning to the end of John’s Gospel, “believe” is the key word. From the very first chapter—“*To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God*”<sup>7</sup>—to the very end—“*These things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God*”<sup>8</sup>—it’s all about belief—“*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him may not perish, but*

may have eternal life.”<sup>9</sup> In the Lazarus story, Jesus says, “Those who believe in me, though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” And Martha answered, “Yes, Lord, I believe.”<sup>10</sup> It sure seems like there ought to be more to it, and that’s not all there is to the Christian life. But that’s all it takes to have a relationship with him. That’s all it takes to break the power of death. That’s all there is to the assurance of eternal life. It’s almost unbelievable, but that’s the amazing grace of God!

Maybe you think there should be more to a relationship with God than just believing—more steps, more entrance requirements, more hoops to jump through. All I can say is, it’s a good thing God is God, and you’re not! To me, this sounds like the best news of all. Confess your sins; profess your faith; access eternal life. How much better could it be? If you are dealing with death today, if you are entombed in the cave of despair, if you are entangled in the burial garments of sin, this has to sound like a voice coming from beyond the grave. Listen to the Voice! Walk toward the Light! Rise up! Come out, and live!

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<sup>1</sup> *U. S. News and World Report*, December 10, 2001, pp. 24-32.

<sup>2</sup> John 11:4.

<sup>3</sup> John 11:25-26.

<sup>4</sup> Lee Strobel, “The Case For Christ,” *Preaching Today* tape.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Hilburn, *Johnny Cash: The Life* (New York: Little, Brown, 2013), 15.

<https://allaboutheaven.org/observations/cash-johnny-relates-the-story-of-his-dying-brother-jack-025840/221>.

<sup>6</sup> Johnny Cash, with Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2003), n. p.

<sup>7</sup> John 1:12.

<sup>8</sup> John 20:31.

<sup>9</sup> John 3:16.

<sup>10</sup> John 11:25-27.