

**Tell It To Me Straight—He’s Dead, Isn’t He? [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
John 11:1—45; Romans 8:6—11**

“Then Jesus told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead.’”

That will be enough with the metaphors. That will be enough with the symbolism. That will be enough with all the parables and the fancy stories about sowing seeds and sheep and wedding banquets and prodigal sons returning home... He’s dead! Lazarus is dead! And death is real. Death is final. Or, at least, death has the feeling of finality about it. And although many of us do our best to soften the blow—to come alongside those who mourn and to grieve for ourselves—the words we use fail and falter.

Initially, however, Jesus does what he’s typically done—which is to present an ordinary, non-threatening kind of thing or activity—and, in this case, it’s sleep. Sleep is basic. Sleep helps us to recuperate. Sleep allows us to start over in the rhythm of a new day. And in literature, of course, we cope with death by comparing it with sleep. And so, when William Shakespeare has Hamlet say, “To be or not to be; that is the question...”, he also gives him the words: “but in that sleep of death, what dreams may come?” Similarly, when the ailing mother, Fantine, sings to Valjean in the musical *Les Misérables*, she’s not going to see her daughter, Cosette, again before she dies; and this is how her grief comes through: “For God's sake, please stay till I am sleeping/ And tell Cosette I love her/ And I'll see her when I wake...” And yet, when Jesus employs the same approach in verse eleven, the disciples become curious: ***‘So he’s going to be alright.’*** Isn’t he? And that’s when Jesus honors their curiosity by telling it to them straight, by telling them where the stench of a moldering corpse meets the twitching of their nostril hairs.

I love the famous line from Mark Twain. Newspapers had reported his death while he was still living; and in reply he said, “Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.” And the reason that’s so funny is the same reason it’s not-so-funny. There are no degrees of exaggeration when it comes to the cessation of a person’s life—which is why Jesus’ delay in going to see Lazarus before he dies is so startling. What’s the message? That death is no big deal? To be sure, Jesus identifies himself in verse 25 as **“The Resurrection and the Life…”** but the problem with that is: **“Remember you are dust; and to dust you shall return.”** Faith in Christ does not disavow the fact that we’re still going to stop breathing. Our internal organs are still going to give out. The synapse connections in the brain will eventually cease to fire and formulate ideas. Moreover, even Lazarus, who is *resuscitated* from death and not *resurrected* like Jesus is proclaimed to be on Easter Sunday—even the reanimated body of Lazarus—will die all over again. And so, if we’re under the impression that belief in heaven or belief in the resurrection somehow cancels out the trauma of being mortal, we’re missing the point. **“Then Jesus told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead.’”** And then, he says, **“I am glad I was not there.”**

So how’s that for pastoral care? Think of it: Lazarus has made the Prayer Chain; people in and around Bethany have heard the news. Mary and Martha, who are known to Jesus and seemingly good friends with Jesus, find themselves in the early stages of grief; they’re weeping and others are offering their condolences while Jesus is taking his time. Why? Could it be that he doesn’t really care? Well, who’s going to define ‘care’ when verse 33 says that he was **“greatly disturbed,”** and verse 35 says, he **“began to weep,”** and verse 36 says, **“See how he loved him!”**

Everything about this should stir the imagination. How does Jesus care?

I remember, when my father died in September of 1996; a few weeks later we were scheduled to start our very first worship service in the cafeteria of an elementary school. Everything was ready. And I didn't think I had any time to feel the loss. In fact, I had done my best *not* to feel it; and maybe for year or so, I wept a few tears, but not in the way that Jesus seems to weep for Lazarus. I had to keep going. There couldn't be any delays. But maybe there could be. And maybe that's where the presence of Jesus, paradoxically, can be found: in the delays, in the times when the official ceremonies aren't keeping us so busy, in the moments when someone tries to say something meaningful but really can't. I know, I know: Jesus declares, "***I am the resurrection and the life; and everyone who lives and believe in me will never die.***" But to simply repeat those words without the delay of Jesus—without wondering about the absence of Jesus—isn't really very honest or helpful. And in the end, it's not very hopeful.

In *Shadowlands*, the story of C.S. Lewis, when he lost his wife, Joy Gresham, there's that scene when Douglas, Joy's nine-year-old son, sits up in the attic of this old house. He's staring at the wardrobe—a piece of furniture that Lewis had described in one of his fantasy books, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. Anyway, C.S. Lewis finds the boy, his adopted son, and the first thing out of the child's mouth is this: "It doesn't work, does it?" The wardrobe of the fantasy doesn't work. His mother is dead. The relationship he's had with her is over... except it isn't. Douglas is now in relationship with her absence and with the hope of mysteriously seeing her again in glory. And yet, right at that moment, Douglas wants to feel; and he asks C.S. Lewis, "Do you believe in heaven?" And Lewis says, he does. And the boy replies, "I don't believe in heaven; but I sure do miss her."

You see, there is going to be a change. We're going to miss her. We're going to miss him. We're going to miss them. Change. Entropy. The Breaking Down of Relationships. What is that feeling? Jesus, in John's Gospel, does not run away from that feeling. He's not quick to put an Easter bow on the reality of death. Lazarus is dead. Joy Gresham is dead. My father is dead. And someday, the people here at Northwood Presbyterian, sleeping through a sermon won't just be sleeping; one day death will have the last literal word on us. And yet—

I was visiting a church to scour out its treasures: the old pews, the office supplies, the filing cabinets and even the baptismal font. The church had died. At one point in its history the Germantown Presbyterian Church could boast over a thousand members. But then with the change in the neighborhood demographics—going from white to black—from upper class to lower class—the people of the church didn't want to accept the change. And so, they dwindled down below one hundred and then to twenty and then to ten. But here's what hit me; although the walls of the facility had been stripped bare, I noticed a wooden plaque still hanging on a nail in the fellowship hall. Coming closer to it, I could read the words; they were dedicated to a young girl who had fallen through the icy surface of the Schuylkill River and died. She was born around 1900 and was dead in 1910; and some of the people wanted to remember her. And I imagined it comforted the family members who lost their daughter or sister to see the plaque up there above them as they ate their potlucks and sipped their coffees. But then, of course, this terrible thought crossed my mind: everyone who remembered her had since died as well; and when the church closed its doors and auctioned off its furniture, the plaque on the wall was just left there; and its last line was just dangling: ***"I am the resurrection and the life."***

You see, it happens all the time, day after day and night after night. You and I echo the words of verse 21: ***“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died...”*** We say, *WHAT IF. WHAT IF things could just stay as they are...* And yet, all the time, day after day and night after night, Jesus becomes present when we notice the absence, when we notice the change and embrace it, when we face up to death and loss in all their forms.

Weimar is a village in Germany; and during World War Two, when the wind was just right, a pillar of smoke would be visible to the occupants of the town; and occasionally, they would catch a fleeting glimpse of the thousands of new arrivals at the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. General George Patton and his army liberated the camp in April of 1945; and when he asked the affluent citizens of Weimar if they knew about the crematoriums and the starvation taking place just five miles down the quaint tree-lined road—the shop keepers, the professors, the butchers, the bakers and the candle stick makers all said they had no idea that people were dying there. And so, Patton made a unorthodox decision; he ordered the cloistered people of the village to get ready to walk; and so, somewhat annoyed that they had to give up a perfectly pleasant afternoon—the war was over, couldn’t they leave it at that—they walked; and as they got closer to the gates at Buchenwald, they began to cover their noses and their mouths and their eyes began to water... because of the stench of dead corpses... and maybe because they didn’t take time to notice. All during the war, they didn’t take time to notice the change. Death may be the last literal word that’s used to describe who we are. Lazarus is dead, as are the people of Weimar. That’s pretty straight forward. That’s plainly the case. And Jesus is not afraid to notice and to say it.

But here's another word that's not so obvious. It'll make sense later: ***I AM THE
RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE.***