

The Other Empty Tomb

John 11:1-45

Alternate Insight, Part 2

A friend of mine described the reaction when he went home, as a young teenager, and announced to his mother that he'd become a Christian. Alarmed, she thought he'd joined some kind of cult. "They've brainwashed you!" she said. He responded, "Mom, if you'd seen what was in my brain, you'd realize why it needed washing!"

Of course, he hadn't been brainwashed. In fact, when people encounter the truth of Jesus the Messiah, things actually begin to clear up. If anything, it's our surrounding culture that brainwashes us, persuading us in a thousand subtle ways that this present world is the only world there is.ⁱ

There's nothing beyond the grave. Even Johnny Depp – that great theologian – commented in a recent interview, "After life it's [nothing more than] dirt and worms." Period. Regardless of the bravado, mankind knows there is more.

Pastor and author, John Ortberg wrote some time ago that he had a friend who once worked as a denominational official in Minnesota. One of his jobs was to travel to little rural communities where they didn't have churches to do funerals. He would go out with an undertaker, and they would drive together in the undertaker's hearse.

One time, they were on their way back from a funeral, and my friend was feeling rather tired. He decided he'd take a nap. Since they were in a hearse, he thought, *Well, I'll just lie down in the back of the hearse.*

He writes, "It sounds like a creepy thing to do, but my friend actually did it."

The guy who was driving the hearse pulled into a service station, because he was running low on gas. The service station attendant was filling up the tank and he was kind of freaked out, because it was a hearse and, he could see a body stretched out in the back. While he was filling the tank, John woke up, opened his eyes, knocked on the window and waved at the attendant. John said he never saw anybody run so fast.ⁱⁱ

Frankly, we're here today because Somebody did in fact rise from the dead.

We have gathered to remind ourselves that the most important thing about our life and our future is bound up in Christ.

The foundation and joy of our message today is not: The stock market has risen . . . it has risen indeed; The dollar has risen . . . it has risen indeed; Your 401(k) has risen . . . it has risen indeed. The value of your home has risen . . . it has risen indeed. Here is all that matters for all of eternity – Christ has risen . . . He is risen indeed."ⁱⁱⁱ

Can you imagine going to the graveyard and seeing someone you knew had died days earlier, come walking out of the family crypt – still wearing their shroud.

It actually happened – in fact, John the Apostle gave us the details and effectively used this graveyard episode as his final reason we should all give glory to Jesus Christ as the true Son of God and our legitimate Messiah.

What I want to do this morning is take you to the other empty tomb; not the tomb of Jesus – because He hasn't died yet – but the tomb of a man who died and rose again in order to bring us all to belief in Christ as Lord and Savior.

This is why John describes the scene in his Gospel account.

Last Lord's Day we looked at the other Jesus – Jesus Barabbas – which was his full name; and today I wanna look at the other empty tomb.

You'll find the scene described in John's Gospel, chapter 11.

The scene opens with the Lord receiving an urgent message – ***John 11:1. Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2. It was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus, was sick. 3. So the sisters sent word to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick.***

Now there's nothing in the message that says, "Come at once" – but that's obviously implied – Lord, your close friend whom you love is sick.

Lazarus was sick with something that in a few hours will prove to be fatal.^{iv}

In fact, if you put the clues together, you discover that Lazarus died the same day the messenger took off to find Jesus.

And the Lord obviously knew that, since He was the omniscient Lord. Notice what he says to his disciples in *verse 4*. ***This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God so that the Son of God may be glorified by it. This sickness is not to end in death.***

But Lazarus died, right? What the Lord means here is that the end of this story for Lazarus is not going to be death and why?

Underline this in your mind. Jesus isn't going to raise Lazarus from the dead because Lazarus is His friend. Jesus isn't gonna raise Lazarus from the dead because Jesus doesn't want people to die.

No – get this purpose statement in your mind from *verse 4* – He is going to raise Lazarus from the dead so that He will undeniably prove He deserves glory that belongs only to God – for He is God the Son.

In the sovereign purpose of Christ – this other empty tomb will prove that He is in control of the grave – worthy of worship that belongs to God alone.

That's why you read that rather startling statement next in *verse 5*. ***Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus [and so He rushed to their home!] No, that's what you would expect to read – but notice – He then stayed two days longer in the place where He was.***

He got this urgent message and delayed his coming. Doesn't He know He can't wait two days? Shouldn't He be hurrying here?

Isn't one of the irritating attributes of God – if we're honest with Him – the fact that He is never in the same rush we're in.

Study His life in the Gospels and you'll never hear Him say, "Hurry up!" At the same time, He never missed what mattered.

I remember one of my sons in elementary school asking me one day, "Daddy, when I blink, do I miss something in life?" He had decided to try not to blink – he didn't want to miss a thing.

I can identify with him . . . don't miss anything – don't blink!

But Jesus waits on purpose. We wait only because we have to; Jesus is waiting because it is His will. And get this – while Jesus delays, Lazarus dies.

Notice verse 11. The Lord says, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep."

Now don't jump into the unbiblical beliefs of soul sleep or limbo or staying behind like some ghost, scaring all your relatives.

Throughout scripture, death is spoken of metaphorically as sleep.

The Old Testament speaks of believers repeatedly as those who, upon death, ***slpt with the fathers (1 Kings 2:10; 11:43)***. It's also used as a euphemism for believers in the New Testament who've already died (***1 Thessalonians 4:13-15***).

The disciples thought Jesus was literally referring to Lazarus sleeping as he recovered from this illness.

Notice *verse 12*. ***The disciples then said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover."*** Why bother going? Keep in mind that they don't want to go to Bethany because it was less than two miles away from Jerusalem and they knew Jesus was a marked man. Jerusalem was danger. So, let's just let Lazarus sleep!

Verse 13. Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. 14. So Jesus then said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe.

Believe what? Remember - that Jesus is worthy of the glory of God.

You see, Mary and Martha wanted Jesus to come immediately and reveal His power over sickness; Jesus wanted to wait so that He could reveal His power over death.

If you put the narrative timeline together, based on what we also know geographically; it took one day for this messenger to find the Lord. Jesus will then wait two days – then spend the fourth day traveling to Bethany.

And listen, four days wasn't a coincidence.

The leading Jewish thought – even the Rabbis of Jesus's day – believed that the soul of a deceased person hovered over the body for three days, hoping to re-enter it; but after three days, it would depart to the spirit world.^v

Jesus is waiting 4 days to eliminate any possible conclusion that Lazarus had never really died.

Jesus is graciously and intentionally condescending to the superstition and false teaching of His generation that believed resurrection from the dead was not possible after the third day!

So on the fourth day, at the end of *verse 15*, **Jesus says, “Let us go to him.”**

I love Thomas’s comment – *verse 16* – **Therefore Thomas, who is called Didymus** (or ‘twin’ – Thomas had a twin sibling although we’re never told who it was) – therefore Thomas said, notice – **Let us also go, so that we may die with him.**

I love this guy. C’mon everyone . . . we’re gonna be within 2 miles of Jerusalem and we know they wanna kill Jesus, and they’re probably gonna kill us too . . . so . . . c’mon, let’s all go to our death! We’re just like him . . . we are all his twins!^{vi}

“Jesus doesn’t know how bad it’s gonna be – but we’re going to follow Him even though it’s gonna end up a disaster – so let’s all go with Jesus and we’ll all die together.”

Thomas has no idea . . . they’re not going to go there and die – they’re going to go there and watch somebody come back to life.

But before we move on, let’s give Thomas some credit. Give him credit for being willing to follow the Lord even though it looked like Jesus was leading them all to certain death.

Even still . . . let’s follow Jesus . . . which makes Thomas perhaps the most courageous of them all.

Now when the Lord arrives, both Martha and Mary talk to Him and basically say the same thing – paraphrased – “Lord, if You’d been here, you would have been able to heal him and he wouldn’t have died.”

In other words, they had absolute confidence that Jesus could heal him – none of them evidently considered the thought that Jesus could raise him.

And by the time Jesus arrives, even the superstitious among them believed that Lazarus was irreversibly and undeniably dead. Resurrection after the third day was unthinkable!^{vii}

Before we go to this other tomb, let me set the scene that Jesus is about to enter.

When Lazarus died, he would have been buried in a cave – sort of a natural family crypt. His tomb would have looked exactly like the tomb of Jesus.

The limbs of the body were wrapped individually to keep them straight; the face would be wrapped separately, including the cheeks in order to keep the mouth closed. In front of the tomb, a large round stone would have been chiseled and then rolled along a groove cut in front of the tomb.^{viii}

Before rolling the stone in front of the cave, the body would be placed on the floor in the front

section of the tomb or on a shelf, carved for that purpose.

The procession to the grave would have included musicians. Even a poor family was expected to hire at least two flute players and one woman to wail and weep. Mary and Martha’s family were not poor – so you can imagine many musicians and a number of hired professional mourners.^{ix}

The procession was always led by these women mourners, because it was held that since Eve by her first sin brought death into the world, women ought to lead the funeral procession to the tomb.

At the tomb, speeches would have been made by close friends – and of course, at this moment, more than any other, the absence of Jesus would have been obvious.

Not only did He not show up in time to heal his friend, he hasn’t even come to the funeral. After the ceremony, the procession would return home where there will be a traditional meal of hard-boiled eggs and lentils – the round eggs and lentils symbolizing the fact that life was always rolling toward death and a stone would eventually be rolled in front of your own grave one day.^x

What followed next was three days of weeping. And Jesus shows up on day four and when He arrives at the tomb He weeps. Literally translated, Jesus bursts into tears.

Jesus, not only fully God, but fully man, can uniquely and entirely feel the sorrow of the grave and the depth of human grief.

The professional mourners are gone, but the Man of Sorrows has just shown up.

Listen, when all your friends leave you to your grief, Jesus shows up. When everyone seems to fade away and forget to care about what you’re going through – Jesus has only just begun caring.

To the fullest extent as He enters into your infirmities and your feelings and your sorrows and your grief.

Notice *verse 33* where Jesus arrives, **deeply moved in spirit** – you can render that, *He was visibly shaking* – **and He said, “Where have you laid him?”**

Follow this . . . did Jesus not know where the family cemetery was located? Of course He knew.

He knew where, when and how long . . . what He wanted was for all of them to show Him so that they will be there with Him to watch what happens.

You see, Jesus doesn’t want to raise Lazarus privately, He wants to raise Lazarus publically.

Why? Remember – so that God will be glorified and He, the Son of God, revealed undeniably and unmistakably for who He was – worthy of glory and worship due unto God.

They said to Him, “**Lord, come and see.**” 35. **Jesus wept.**

In other words, Jesus arrives at the tomb and bursts into tears.

He felt fully and completely all the sorrow of this scene. One New Testament scholar believes that included in these tears of sorrow are tears in knowing that He is about to call Lazarus back from Paradise where he has only begun to enjoy his surroundings – knowing that he will be called back into a world of suffering and sin and death again, eventually.

Jesus now gives this strange command – **verse 38. So Jesus, again being deeply moved within, came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39. Jesus said, “Remove the stone.” Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, “Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days.” Then Jesus said to her, “Did I not say to you that if you believe; you will see the glory of God?”**

In other words, Mary and all the others, for that matter, assumed that Jesus missed the funeral and didn’t have a chance to say goodbye and he wanted one last look!

But Jesus isn’t going to say goodbye, He’s about to say, “Hello!”

Roll the stone away – not so Jesus could go in there – but so Lazarus can come out.

And keep in mind that Jesus could have uttered one word and the stone could have been tossed aside like a frisbee – just as the stone in front of His own tomb will one day soon be thrown aside – literally thrown out of the groove and away from the tomb by an obvious supernatural power.

But Jesus wants all these witnesses to know that they are indeed at the right tomb – and they will all be able to see the body of Lazarus lying in there motionless, in his shroud.

In other words, they’re not just gonna hear Jesus command Lazarus to get up, they’re going to be able to literally watch Lazarus sit up . . . and stand up . . . and shuffle to the door of the tomb.

So the stage is set for this dramatic scene; **verse 43, He cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth.”**

Literally, “Lazarus, Here! Outside! He speaks with raw, divine authority.”^{xi}

44. The man who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Is it any wonder that the text records next that many of the Jews believed in Him. I guess so!

And Christ was indeed glorified as God the Son.

- The same person of the Godhead who uttered the first command at the dawn of time – “Let there be light!”
- The same Lord of Creation who looked out at the heaving waves and the howling wind and said, “Be still!”
- The same Divine Healer who looked at the leper and said, “Be clean!”
- The same Master of the invisible world who commanded the demons inside the tormented man, “Be gone!”
- He is the same conquering Lord over death and the grave who shouted, “Come forth!”^{xii}

But can you even begin to imagine all the miracles wrapped inside this miracle of bringing Lazarus back to life?

- His heart has been still for 96 hours, but now it is pumping again and the blood that had coagulated and corrupted is immediately balanced and healthy;
- a brain without oxygen for 4 minutes is dangerously deadly; Lazarus has been without oxygen for 4 days – yet he is alert and immediately responsive;
- his nerves that had already begun decomposing and his muscles disintegrating are now capable of immediately responding as he sits up and then stands up, moving, balancing, walking – maybe even sort of hopping to the doorway.

Can you imagine the astonishment . . . the amazement . . . the shock . . . the gasping . . . the fainting . . . some pointing . . . the hugging . . . the crying . . . the laughter . . .

Can you imagine all eyes sweeping toward Jesus . . . can you imagine the worship.

He is the Son of God . . . seen not just in His own empty tomb but at this other empty tomb. And by the way, this is a prophetic picture of a future scene for all of humanity

One day, the Gospel of John recorded earlier, Jesus said that all of mankind will experience a resurrection of their bodies from the grave.

For those who did not believe in Christ – their bodies will be resurrected at Christ’s command for the final judgment – reconstituted and immortalized – reunited with their eternal spirit that has been, upon their death, suffering in torment, awaiting the final judgment (Revelation 20).

For those who believe in Christ – their bodies will also be resurrected earlier in time – and reunited with their spirits which have been immediately upon death with the Lord – now having physical resurrected, immortalized, glorified bodies to enjoy forever the new heavens and the new earth. The raising of Lazarus – the lesson from this other empty tomb – is really a preview of the divine power Christ will display when He raises all the dead to their glorified bodies and to their eternal future.^{xiii}

Not one of us will be able to avoid His command to rise. The question is, what will your resurrection mean for you, one day? Where will your immortal, resurrected body, reunited with your immortal spirit live forever one day?

Will it be to that place of eternal judgment because you would not glorify Him as your God and Savior? Or will it be to that place of eternal joy reserved in Heaven for all who believe in Him.

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- i N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone, Part 1* (WJK, 2004), p. 43
- ii John Ortberg, *The Empty Tomb: How Will You Respond?* Menlo Park Presbyterian Church
- iii Adapted from John Ortberg, *Resurrection: Metaphor or Miracle?* Menlo Park Presbyterian Church (Menlo Park, CA) (preached 4-12-09)
- iv Charles Ryrie, *The Miracles of our Lord* (Thomas Nelson, 1984), p. 158
- v Adapted from John MacArthur, *John 1-11* (Moody Publishers, 2006), p. 461
- vi Adapted from Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Alive: John 1-12* (Victor Books, 1986), p. 135
- vii Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on John* (Zondervan, 2010), p. 199
- viii Adapted from Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: John* (InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 293
- ix Ibid, p. 338
- x Adapted from William Barclay, *The Gospel of John: Volume 2* (Westminster Press, 1956), p. 194
- xi Adapted from Keener, p. 345
- xii Adapted from John Phillips, *Exploring the Gospel of John* (Loizeaux Brothers, 1988), p. 219
- xiii Adapted from MacArthur, p. 475