

“But on the Other Side of the Stone”
by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
Fourth in a series on John 11

John 11:38-44

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Read the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

I've been taking my time working through this whole story. We needed to spend time with Jesus as he heard that his friend Lazarus was ill, and as he delayed two extra days before going to Lazarus' side, and as he realized that Lazarus had died, yet did not despair.

But that was on this side of the stone.

We needed to be with Martha, Lazarus' sister, as Jesus arrived too late, and as she cried to Jesus, *“If only you had been here, my brother would not have died,”* yet still professed to Jesus, *“I believe God will do what you ask God to.”*

But that was on this side of the stone.

We needed to hear Jesus say to Martha: *“I am the resurrection and the life.”* God is keeping God's promise of Death's defeat in person, in Jesus.

But that was on this side of the stone.

We needed to be with Mary, Lazarus' other sister. I think she trusted Jesus most, but when great trust encounters great disappointment, it becomes great pain. All she could muster to say to Jesus was, *“If only you had been here . . . my brother . . . not died.”*

But Mary sobbed on this side of the stone.

We needed to see Jesus break. We needed to feel his fury at Death, his indignation at Death's devastation. We needed to gather his tears, for he cries with those who cry.

Everything that has happened, however, has been on this side of that stone.

But what about the other side?

II

Nothing is happening there. The other side is where we bury things. That's where they've put what's left of Lazarus. And if you did not know Lazarus, you know someone else who has been put there. You have other things buried there too.

Why is that stone there?

Hard, and heavy, and lifeless, we put it there to keep us away from what's on the other side of the stone.

On this side is life. Sure, you know life can be hard. Life has its pains, sufferings and sorrows. But on the other side of the stone? Only death.

Sure, on this side there are tears: Martha's tears, Mary's tears, our tears, Jesus' tears. But on the other side of the stone? Corpses don't cry. I'd rather have the tears.

Sure, on this side there are disappointments and doubts. But on the other side everything is certain and confident: the certainty of decay, the confidence of corruption.

On this side, stories continue to be told. Fires of hope have oxygen, and continue to flame. Tomorrow is always coming. The sun is always rising. The birds will be singing. And you can be breathing in the freshness of spring.

But on the other side of the stone, it just stinks.

III

It's not just the dead. The other side of the stone is for anything we cannot deal with anymore.

I cannot undo what I did. I cannot unvoice what I said. It stinks! So I put it in and stone-shut it up.

I can't face what he did to me. I can't deal with what she said to me. So I put it in and stone-shut it up.

Stories of human suffering. Statistics of human nastiness. The magnitude of creation in crisis. The casual cruelty, the leisurely lying. I cannot deal with it. I don't want to smell it any more. So I put it in and stone-shut it up.

Though there's a problem with that. All that stuff in there . . . is us. That's stuff we do to each other. Stuff I do. Stuff done to me. It's who we are. What we try to shut away from us, it's us. What stinks, it's me.

Lazarus is decaying with his ancestors. Tombs were family affairs. As they lay him in there, they had to know that, someday soon, their bones would mingle with his on the other side of the stone.

It's us.

Now, don't get me wrong. The stone serves a purpose. Better to have dead Lazarus — and, someday, dead us — in there than out here. And some things we simply cannot deal

with, and need to put inside.

Still, the stone is an illusion, a polite fiction. It doesn't really keep us out. Not forever.

IV

"Take it away!"

"But Jesus, on the other side of the stone it stinks. Lazarus . . . four days . . . in there . . . stinks. All the stuff that I've put in there . . . the stuff I can't deal with . . . my stuff that is hopeless . . . the decay and corruption . . . stinks!"

"Ah," Jesus says, "but I told you. You are going to see God's glory. You are going to see God at work. You are going to see what God has already been doing. But to see," Jesus says, "you gotta take away the stone!"

They take it away.

The Good Shepherd who calls his sheep by name, the Resurrection and the Life, gives a shout that roars around the world: *Lazarus! Come out!*

Lazarus comes out.

From the other side of the stone, back to this side, Life's side, Lazarus comes out.

Jesus shouts Death down, and Lazarus comes out!

V

Now, if for a few moments we can take our eyes off of Lazarus — and, really, can we — we will notice some things.

Notice that Jesus is not a one-man show. Remember in the Bible reading, him praying? He is the Son of the Father, flowing with the Spirit. God the Trinity is at work gloriously in all of this, in everything.

Notice how Jesus turns to us, too. He calls on folks to move away the stone. He calls on folks to unwrap the burial cloths from Lazarus. When Jesus is working at bringing life into someone's death, he will use us. There are stones we can remove for someone. There are cloths we can unwrap from someone. Jesus brings us into what he is doing.

Still, though, remember we don't do the raising. Moving the stone away won't help — it would be foolish, actually — if Jesus does not pour life into the grave. Unwrapping the cloths won't help — it would be gross, actually — if Jesus does not first raise the dead.

Another thing to notice. In the sweeping story of Jesus, this is a preview. For Lazarus, Jesus has hit rewind. Jesus rewinds Lazarus back through death into life so Lazarus' song can play again. But it's still the same song. Someday, Lazarus will die again, and stay dead.

But when, not so long after, Jesus himself resurrects from Death, it is different. Everything changes. Jesus' resurrection is not a rewind. It's a whole new song he starts playing. It's growing louder and louder, never stopping.

What happened to Lazarus was only for Lazarus. With Jesus, resurrection is for us all.

VI

So you can come out!

You've got that stuff you've buried on other side of the stone, that stuff that stinks. Bring it out with you.

That stuff you have done which you cannot deal with . . . if Jesus our Forgiveness is calling, bring it out with you!

That stuff you've endured which others have put on you . . . if Jesus our Healing is calling, bring it out with you!

That stuff in our world that overwhelms you . . . if Jesus our Peace is calling, bring it out with you!

You bring it all out, and see what Jesus is doing with it.

When you are in there . . . and your eyes click open. And it is dark. And the air is stale. And you are wondering where you are. And you are wrapped up tight. And it smells awful. . . . And there's a scraping of stone moving, and a burst of light shining, and the Voice is roaring . . .

Well, you didn't raise yourself. You were dead.

But now, you'd better come out!