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The Raising of Lazarus

Lazarus reflects on his experience – a soliloquy

based on John 11

by Ralph Milton

We used to talk about it quite a lot – Mary and Martha and me. What happens when you die?

I'd always figured that you went to sleep, sort of. You close your eyes and that's that. It's not bad and it isn't painful but it is the end. As it is written, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Mary didn't say much. She always listened a long time before she'd say anything and then it was usually a question. You could tell that she was really thinking, though. Martha was right up front. She said what she thought and she said it directly and so she and I would go at it, hour after hour sometimes.

Martha believed in the resurrection. "When the time is right," she would say, "when the time is right, God will gather up all the people who have died – gather them up and invite them to a glorious banquet, a wonderful celebration of love and peace. I can't prove that, but I believe it, Lazarus. I really do."

"Hah, you've joined the Pharisee's, Martha. You've heard too many speeches. But all you have to do is look at the evidence. When a person dies, their corpse decays, and in a few months there's nothing left. Death is death, Martha. The end. Listen to the Sadducees, instead of all those Pharisees. Pharisees are air-heads. The Sadducees have their feet on the ground. Reality is reality, even when it isn't very pleasant."

Of course, we never resolved the question. How could we? No one had ever died and come back to tell us about it. Martha and I would have kept arguing forever, if I hadn't had an experience that changed everything.

It started just as a cold, and then a fever. A few days later, I knew I was in serious trouble. Martha was beside my bed, wiping my face with a cool, wet cloth, and I could see the fear in her eyes. "We've sent for Jesus," she said simply.

"He can't!" It was all I could manage, but Martha didn't need explanations. She knew it would be very dangerous for Jesus to come anywhere near Jerusalem. He was too much of a threat to the establishment, and everyone knew he would be arrested on any provocation.

“Rest, my dear brother,” Martha said quietly. “Rest, and trust in God who loves you and will take care of you.” I could see the love in her eyes.

I don’t remember anything else. But I do remember a sense of movement, a sense of light – bright light, beautiful light. I was floating, up high above everything, and I could see Mary and Martha weeping and I wanted to go to them and tell them I was all right, but then I moved away, somewhere through a long, bright, spiral tunnel that was cool and warm and good. I felt loved and cared for and at peace.

Then a voice. It was a voice I knew, but I couldn’t name it, and there were no words at first, just a voice. Someone was calling me, and I had to go back even though I didn’t want to go back. I had to go back because the voice wanted me, needed me back. And then the voice had my name in it. “Lazarus, come out.”

“Lazarus, come out.” I was awake now, and in a dark place, a tomb as I discovered later, and the first thing I remember was that I smelled – I smelled of death, but the voice kept calling from the door of the tomb, “Lazarus, come out.” And then I knew the voice. I knew it was the voice of my friend, Jesus.

There was a confusion of weeping and fussing and excited talk as I came out, and my two sisters hurried me into the house and fussed until they had the grave wrappings stripped off, got me washed and into some clean clothes. And it was only then that I began to read their faces – Mary, Martha, Jesus – faces strained with weeping, eyes red and tired, but voices full of joy.

“Welcome back to life,” said Jesus, as he gave me a careful, tender, hug.

“Yes, yes,” beamed Martha as she kissed my cheek, “Welcome back to life Lazarus. There is life after death, just as you said there was, Jesus.”

“You mean I was dead?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” said Jesus. “But I do know you were never away from the love of God. Whatever happened to you Lazarus, the God you love was there and part of it.”

“You have no idea, Jesus,” I exclaimed. “And you have no idea how right you were about resurrection, Martha.” And then I tried to tell Jesus and my sisters about it. But – well, I couldn’t really.

Can anyone, ever, put the experience of God’s love into words?

**Ralph Milton has written a number of books,
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