

What's Worse Than Suffering and Death

John 11

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Austin, TX on Nov 7, 2021

The story of the raising of Lazarus seems pretty straightforward—yes, it's insane and miraculous and, as far as I know, unrepeated in human history—but, for us, from the standpoint of Christian doctrine, it endures as a simple, compelling story that communicates a basic Gospel truth: God is more powerful than death.

However, if we sit with this story long enough, some of its details, I think, emerge as a little strange. That is, there are parts of the story that, when you really think about them, seem to maybe complicate, or in the very least qualify that basic gospel truth. Things that suggest there might be more for us to learn from the story of Lazarus than simply that God is more powerful than death. There are two details in particular that I find to be worth our consideration.

Number one is that Jesus does not actually alleviate Lazarus's suffering. At the beginning of the story, when Lazarus is on his deathbed, Jesus waits. Jesus does not take his pain away. And more, Jesus lets Lazarus die.

And, in fact, in bringing him back from the dead, we cannot ignore that Jesus is only guaranteeing for Lazarus *more* suffering. In the very next chapter of John's Gospel we're told the authorities set out not only to kill Jesus, but to kill Lazarus too, being as he is walking proof of this Palestinian revolutionary's power. Friends with Jesus was far more likely to make your life *more* difficult than it was an effective strategy to avoid pain and suffering.

So this begs the question: If, in death, his suffering was finally over, why bring Lazarus back?

The second strange and suggestive detail of this story does not occur within the boundaries of John's Gospel, but is another event in the life of Lazarus we can nonetheless be confident happened at some point: that he died, again. Lazarus, the poor chap, had to die twice. C. S. Lewis has a lovely poem addressed to Lazarus that goes like this:

*Your battered ship at anchor lay
Seemingly safe in the dark bay
No ripple stirs, obediently
Put out a second time to sea
Well knowing that your death (in vain
Died once) must all be died again*

So, in sum, in raising Lazarus from the dead, in this straightforward story about God's power over death, Jesus does not, for Lazarus, solve the suffering problem nor does he solve the death problem.

So what, we might ask, is this story really about?

Because suffering and death are *the* fundamental problems of our existence, right? What could be worse than those things? Coping with mortality is basically what it means to be human. Think about how much energy is spent—both for us individually, and us as a society—trying to put off suffering and death. For example, probably the very best contribution one can make to the world, so our society assumes, is to make some kind of medical breakthrough. The kinds of technology with which we're most enamored are those that minimize our pain or inconvenience in the short term, and those that promise us the opportunity to live on Mars or in the Metaverse in the long term. Our most valuable minds, so we say, are those researching how to eliminate poverty and malnutrition, how to avoid adverse weather or famine, and how to manage limited natural resources. And our most important citizens are those committed to leveraging that knowledge into policy at local and national levels. Suffering and death are the problems we most want to solve.

And for us Christians, this, we often say, is *exactly* what God is for. That is, God is God precisely because God solves the suffering problem and the death problem. There's a reason John 3:16 is the most popular verse in the Bible: ". . . so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life." We believe as Christians we're headed towards a future where suffering is no more, and where death is a distant memory. And that is true.

But it *also* remains true that in the story of Lazarus, suffering and death don't appear to be Jesus' primary concern. So I can't help but wonder if maybe there's another problem we're forgetting about. Is it possible that there are worse things than no longer being alive?

So perhaps we should ask: If, raised from the grave, Lazarus still has to suffer, and Lazarus still has to die, what *does* Lazarus get from Jesus?

The answer is that Lazarus gets relationship. He gets to be with Jesus again. That is, Lazarus is restored to friendship with Jesus, and also welcomed back into the loving arms of Mary and Martha. Which should make us wonder: Is it possible that, in God's eyes, the good that comes from living in restored relationship with God and with his neighbors outweighs the bad of suffering and death?

Is it possible, therefore, that the fundamental problem of human existence is not actually suffering or death but isolation? Is it possible that being separated from God and one another is worse than death?

Let me try to put this another way: What is heaven? Heaven is where we get to be with God and be with one another within a renewed creation—all in perfect harmony. Some might be tempted to describe heaven as I did above—a place where suffering is no more, and death is a distant memory. But we need to be very careful with that definition of heaven. If I told you heaven was a series of magical islands where you live forever and you'd never get sick or experience pain but the only rule is that there's only one person allowed on each island, would you be interested in going to that heaven? The state of just continued being, even continued being without suffering, is not good enough. Living forever alone is not a description of heaven. It's actually one of the classic descriptions of hell.

In other words, what makes the absence of suffering and death valuable is precisely the relationships that are now possible. What makes death hurt so much is precisely the breakdown of relationship—that we don't get to be with them anymore, and that they don't get to be with others.

What if the reason God exists is not to overcome suffering and death, but that overcoming suffering and death are only means to an end for God? What if they are just the things that must be overcome so that God can be in relationship with us? What if isolation is the deeper problem? What if relationship is the thing that matters most in the world?

Jesus is the Resurrection. That's true. God, in Christ, has removed Death's sting. But we can't stop at Jesus being just the Resurrection. Jesus is also the Life. God wants to have a life with you.

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I want to tell you a short story. Towards the end of his life, from inside an asylum in the south of France, Vincent Van Gogh painted the Raising of Lazarus. It was a copy, actually, based on a black and white etching by Rembrandt, a print of which Van Gogh had hanging on his cell wall. He made a handful of these kinds of paintings—copies of other famous works of art—because, in the immediate aftermath of his various epileptic and suicidal episodes, he was not allowed to leave his cell or interact with others, the artistic consequences of which were that he was not able to paint landscapes or portraits as was his custom. And so, being, as he was, dogmatically opposed to painting scenes from his imagination, and, of course, *not* painting not being an option for an artist of such manic habits, his only alternative was copying the works of others.

The gorgeous thing about this small and mostly unknown selection of Van Gogh's oeuvre is that, having only black and white prints to work from, he improvised his own colors—and color, of course, being the primary instrument of Van Gogh's genius, the resulting paintings are rapturous, pulsating, utterly new works of art in and of themselves.

There is one particularly interesting and relevant improvisation of color in his painting of the Raising of Lazarus; notably, Lazarus's hair color, which is a distinct and fiery red—a strange choice, one might think, when trying to depict someone from the Middle East. But upon further reflection, we realize there's something else going on in the mind of this artist: It's that, with red hair, Lazarus looks not a little like Vincent Van Gogh.

You and I are Vincent Van Gogh this morning. Which is to say, the reality of the Christian life is that we are walking around in the resurrected body of Lazarus. On the one hand, in some sense we Christians have been raised from the dead already. We've been given new life in Christ. The Spirit dwells in us. We've died to the old self; we are a new creation.

And yet, on the other hand, we still suffer. And we will still die. It is true that God is more powerful than suffering and death. And it is true that God, in the end, will sort those things out. But in the meantime, these problems remain. There's still a lot of suffering and death you and I must still endure.

Jesus, in this strange story of Lazarus, relieves the heaviness of those burdens for us by putting them in perspective, by telling us that the worse problem is our isolation—and here's the most important part—and then showing us that *that's the problem God has already solved*. Is it possible that we've allowed ourselves to be so distracted by the problems of suffering and death that we've ignored that God has already solved the deeper problem?

You see, in this light, humanity's desperate pursuit to solve the problems of suffering and death is marked by a deep irony: We use medicine and technology to live longer, healthier lives than any time in human history—that's true—but we also use lots of that same technology to further isolate ourselves from one another. We can talk to someone across the globe but we don't tend to know our neighbors. We can live to 95, but we die in hospitals instead of our homes. We text instead of call.

When we shift our understanding, when we consider isolation, not mortality, to be humanity's most important problem, we might be inspired to turn our attention not on what we don't have, but on what's right in front of us. The answer to our soul's deepest problem might be closer than we think.

God wants to be in relationship with you. God doesn't promise to take your suffering away right now. He doesn't promise that you won't have to die. But God does promise that he will be with you no matter what. And when you have this most important thing, when you have relationship with God, suffering and death are quite literally not the end of the world. Those are only the birth pangs, to a never-ending, beautiful life of joy.

Amen.