

When Jesus finally shows up four days late, Mary and Martha get a little passive-aggressive with him. They both say the same thing: *If you had been here, my brother would not have died* (John 11:21, 32). They aren't really blaming Jesus...but they are. And the truth is, we all have passive-aggressive tendencies toward God, don't we? We don't blame God for the bad things that happen, but we also know God could have kept them from happening. So why doesn't God act? Why didn't Jesus just teleport to Bethany and heal Lazarus?

My take is this: Jesus had been there and done that. Jesus could have walked on water, arrived in the nick of time, and healed Lazarus as he was drawing his last breath. But Jesus had already revealed his healing power. Now it was time to reveal his resurrection power. And you cannot resurrect what has not died. So Jesus waited a little longer to reveal a little more of his power. And he does the same thing with us. If you feel like you're in a holding pattern, it may be because God is getting ready to do something more miraculous than you previously expected; but something precious might have to die first so that God can resurrect it.

If Jesus had simply healed Lazarus, I'm sure some people would have praised God. I'm also sure some skeptics would have claimed Lazarus wasn't really that sick to begin with or credited his recovery to the miracle of medicine. But when someone has been dead for four days, there is only one logical and theological explanation. You have witnessed a miracle of the first order, and that first-order miracle is the seventh sign in John's Gospel.

If Jesus had simply healed Lazarus, it would have reinforced the faith people already had. Jesus wanted to stretch their faith: in order to do that, sometimes things have to go from bad to worse before they get better!

Comedian Gracie Allen is purported to have said: "Never put a comma where God puts a period and never put a period where God puts a comma." When someone dies, we naturally put a period on it. Game over. But when Jesus heard the news that Lazarus was sick, Jesus made a bold prediction: *This sickness will not end in death* (11:4). I used to have a problem with that statement because it seems like Jesus is wrong: Lazarus does, in fact, die; but the operative word is *end*. Jesus said the sickness would not end in death, and it didn't. Jesus knew Lazarus would die, but Jesus didn't put a period there. He just inserted a four-day comma.

Mary and Martha felt like Jesus was four days late! They thought the window of opportunity closed when Lazarus drew his last breath. But nothing is over until God says it's over! God always gets the final word. And God's final word is always life. Martha knew this. What comes out of her mouth ranks as one of the greatest statements of faith in all of Scripture: *Lord...if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask* (11:21-22).

Did you catch the all-important conjunction in there? There is a "*but*" between her statement of fact and her statement of faith. Evidently, Martha is still holding out hope even four days after the funeral. Some would say it was her grief speaking, but she was speaking out of *faith*. Faith often looks like it's out of touch with reality, but that's because it's in touch with a reality that is more real than anything you can ever see or hear or taste or touch or smell with your five senses. Faith is our sixth sense, and if you're truly in touch with God, sometimes it'll appear as if you are out of touch with reality.

The sentence could end after Martha says, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." But Martha doesn't put a period there. Faith inserts a comma, even at the end of a death sentence. And I love the little phrase embedded in this statement of faith: *even now*. It's one of my favorite phrases in all of Scripture. "Even now God will give you whatever you ask." Even when it seems like God is four days late, it's too soon to give up. Even when it seems like your dream is dead and buried, don't put a period there.

The seventh miracle reveals the true identity, the full identity of Jesus. He's not just the Lord of time and space and algebra, as impressive as those miracles are. Jesus is more than just the Wine Maker or the Water Walker. Jesus is the Grave Robber, and he saves his boldest claim for last: *I am the resurrection and the life* (11:25).

It's that unique claim that sets Jesus apart. Christianity is not built on a philosophy or a code of ethics. The foundation of our faith is one fundamental fact: the empty tomb. After cheating death by calling Lazarus out of his tomb, Jesus walked out of his own tomb under his own power! If the resurrection did not happen, Paul says, Christianity ranks as history's cruelest hoax. We're not just wasting our lives worshipping God: we're living a lie. But if Jesus walked out of the tomb two thousand years ago, all bets are off. Or perhaps, all bets are on Jesus.

Most people have no hesitation acknowledging that Jesus was compassionate and wise, a great teacher or a powerful prophet; but that isn't who he claimed to be. Jesus claimed to be

the resurrection and the life. After asserting this identity as the resurrection and the life, Jesus pops a point-blank question that punctuates Martha’s life: *Do you believe this?* (11:25-26). Remember, Jesus hadn’t called Lazarus out of the tomb quite yet, so Martha was still in the depths of despair. Hope was four days dead. Yet Martha responds with her simple profession of faith: “Yes, Lord.” One little *yes* can change your life. One little *yes* can change your eternity.

The resurrection of Jesus is the axis around which our faith revolves. When Jesus rose from the dead, it radically redefined reality. When he walked out of the tomb under his own power, the word *impossible* was removed from our vocabulary. The resurrection is the history-changer, the game-changer; the trick is learning to live as if Jesus was crucified yesterday, rose from the dead today, and is coming back tomorrow.

The resurrection should be something we celebrate every day in every way. The resurrection of dead bodies is nothing short of miraculous, and the re-materialization of dead bodies when Christ returns is going to be better than reality TV. But the resurrection miracles don’t stop there. God raises dreams from the dead, God resurrects dead relationships, and no matter what part of your personality has died at the hands of sin or suffering or Satan himself, the Grave Robber came to give you back your life!

No one had laughed or smiled since the day Lazarus was laid to rest. When he walked out of the tomb, no one could stop. The seventh miracle is a snapshot of who Jesus is, what Jesus does. The Grave Robber steals back what death has stolen, then he gives it back to us, with interest. When Jesus died on the cross, Satan smiled. But the Grave Robber got the last laugh. He always does. And if you give him a chance, he’ll give you a second chance. He will give you your smile back. He will give you your laugh back. He will give you your life back. Do you believe this? If you do, God will make your impossible possible!

Prayer: O Lord, we hear you calling, but we are bound in the grave-cloths of earthly expectations. We believe in you, but we listen to the world’s call and think we cannot follow. Unbind us from expectations. Give us strength to live through disappointments. Grant us courage to overcome obstacles. Fill us with your presence and make us living carriers of your love to others who need it. Unbind us. Call us out of the caves in which we dwell. Help us to roll away the stones for each other. Bring us to new life, we pray in the name of Jesus, the Ever Living. Amen

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The Grave Robber

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The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN 56537

John 11:32-44

The second law of thermodynamics states that if left to its own devices, everything in the universe moves toward disorder and decay. Cars rust. Food rots. Human beings grow old and die. It’s called the law of entropy. The only way to prevent entropy is to introduce an outside energy source to counteract it. The technical term is negentropy, and the refrigerator is a perfect example. If you plug it into an electrical outlet, it produces cold air that keeps food from rotting. If, however, the refrigerator is unplugged from its power source, entropy will take over again: the food will spoil.

The law of entropy doesn’t just govern the physical universe. It has governed the spiritual realm since it was introduced in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve’s original sin. God forewarned them: *Do not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will surely die* (Gen. 2:17). While they didn’t die immediately after eating the forbidden fruit, their disobedience introduced the process of decay that leads to physical and spiritual death. That original sin introduced sickness and suffering to the equation of life. As Adam and Eve discovered, sin opens the door to entropy. The more you sin, the more your life moves toward disorder and decay. Sin is much more than a moral dividing line between right and wrong. It’s a matter of life and death. Jesus didn’t die on the cross to make bad people good. He brings dead people to life! And Lazarus is exhibit A.

This miracle doesn’t just foreshadow Jesus’ own resurrection. It foreshadows yours and mine! It’s not just something Jesus did for Lazarus. It’s a snapshot of what Jesus wants to do in our life right now. When we sin, it’s as if our soul gets wrapped up in grave clothes. Sin buries us alive and makes a mummy out of us. We become a shadow of the person we were meant to be. And if we keep on sinning, it’ll weigh us down like a hundred pounds of grave clothes. But Jesus is calls us out of our tombs and into new life.