

“You Never Know Who You Will Run Into” Series: “Scared to Death”

April 10, 2011

Texts: John 11:1-44

There are several eye-witness accounts in the gospels of persons who were blessed by Jesus' miracles, even more than one resuscitation. But, of those, none is more emotionally or theologically significant than the story of Jesus' raising his dear friend, Lazarus, from the dead. Hear this story again from the perspective of one of Lazarus' neighbors, Simon the Leper.

My life used to be pretty ordinary. As a child I enjoyed playing in the streets and yards of friends. Being part of the community was everything to us, like being a member of a large family. Anything that threatened the “purity” of the community was a very bad thing. I remember when I was a child if someone had some disease on their skin, it was very scary. Everyone was concerned that they might bring their “uncleanness” upon the community. It didn't matter exactly what it was, if it didn't get well in a few days, folks started getting antsy, sometimes they even kicked them out of the community. If they got better they could eventually come back home to the family.

Unfortunately, for many their reunion never came and they spent the rest of their lives unclean and unwelcome. I was one of those unfortunate ones for years. All my young hopes and dreams of health and wealth and happiness were dashed that day when the rabbi said I had to get out. My life was over! Being cut off from everyone and everything important to me, **I WAS SCARED TO DEATH.** Life as a leper was no life at all. Everything you loved is lost. Rich folks would toss me a coin or two sometimes, but it was hard to get to the market crying “Unclean, Unclean” all the time. And, no one wanted to take the money after it had been in a leper's hand.

I was just waiting for the rest of me to die when I heard about a crazy rabbi up in the Galilee region who did the unthinkable...he touched a leper and healed him, clean as a newborn baby. It got him in a lot of trouble with the rabbis and scribes, don't you know, but it didn't bother the common people. Everywhere he went the crowds of sick people swarmed around him. One day he came to Bethany on his way to Jerusalem. I was hanging around the road hoping someone would toss me a few coins so they could brag at the Temple about all the alms they gave to the poor. Anyway, this rabbi comes down the road with a bunch of people around him trying to hear every word he was saying like he was the Messiah or something. When they got to where I was, I was about to cry out “Unclean,” but the rabbi looked at me kneeling on the ground and said, “Simon, do you want to be clean?” I was shocked. First, how did he know my name? But, even more profound was what he asked me? That hope of ever being clean again was buried so deep in the ashes of the old life I lost I couldn't answer. Then he asked me again, “Simon, do you want to be clean?” That time I was looking up into his face. Something in his eyes startled me from my self-pity...a flash of living hope burst into my dead heart. “Could it be possible,” I wondered. Was that rumor true? Did he really care about someone like me, unclean, who everyone thought I was guilty of some horrible secret sin? But, I couldn't help but trust him. And the next thing I knew he is lifting my pockmarked arm and raising me up from the dust. It was like lightening blasting through me and when I got my senses again I could see new, healthy skin; it was my own hand. I never dreamed it could happen to me. I was skipping around like a young goat kid, part of the living world again; nothing could be better! What a wonderful future for normal life, because of that crazy rabbi named Jesus.

After a few days I was able to go back to the house and field my father left me. Sometimes, Jesus and his friends stayed with me when they came through Bethany, even though everyone still called me “Simon the leper.” Kind of funny isn’t it, the future King of Israel staying in the house of a former leper? It was fine with me. I had lots of room since I didn’t have any family of my own.

My neighbor, Lazarus and his two unmarried sisters, Martha and Mary, were friends of Jesus too. He always stopped to see them when he was here, and no wonder, Martha was the best cook in town, bar none! And, Mary became famous later for how she poured out a whole jar of perfume on his feet and dried them with her hair. Well, Lazarus was as good a man, as they come, but he got so sick he was dying. **THE SISTERS WERE SCARED TO DEATH.** Too bad Jesus wasn’t around then. The scribes and priests were so angry at him they drove him out of Judea, and he went back to Galilee. They sent a message for Jesus to come heal their brother, but he didn’t come for nearly a week. By then it was too late. We had already had his funeral and buried him four days earlier. It was so sad because the sisters didn’t have any other family to support and protect them; we all were worried what would happen to them. They had many friends come from Jerusalem to mourn with them. When Jesus got there he waited outside of town so as to not attract a crowd. When I heard he had come I took Martha to see him and she was steamed. She lit right into him, “Why didn’t you come right then when you heard that your friend you love so much was dying? You could have saved him. I know the Father would do anything you ask him. But, now it’s too late; you’re too late!”

Jesus, trying to stay cool, said to her, “Now take it easy; your brother will rise again, you know.” “Well of course he will in the final resurrection, but where does that leave me and my sister in the meantime?” she shot back.

“Martha, how long have you known me?” he answered. “Don’t you realize, **I AM THE RESURRECTION; I AM LIFE. Anyone who believes in me will live. Even if he does die, the life I give will never end in death. Do you get it? You know me. Believe me!”**

When Martha looked into Jesus’ eyes he grabbed her heart just like he grabbed mine that day. **Then she KNEW for sure, and she blurted out, “You are the one we have been waiting for so long, the Messiah, the Son of God himself!”** That was it, out of her own mouth. It startled us both, the ultimate realization: **Jesus was The ONE from God. He came to show us God does love us!**

Then Jesus asked her, “Where’s Mary? Would you please bring her to me?” Martha went and whispered to Mary that Jesus was asking for her. She instantly got up and took off without saying a word. All the mourners wanted to follow her if she was going to the tomb. They must have been surprised that she went the other way to where Jesus was waiting. They followed her anyway. Mary loved Jesus like her own brother, such a tender hearted soul. So when she got to Jesus she fell in a heap at his feet weeping, “Jesus, you could have saved him if you had just come when we called you. You could have saved him. I know you loved him too. Why did you wait so long? He needed you; we needed you so much. **We were so scared!**”

At that Jesus was moved deeply with different emotions, anger, grief and hope all at the same time. He couldn’t hold back any longer and he cried along with her. It was so strange to see a grown man crying, so unexpected, but deeply touching, so sincere and loving.

Then Jesus said, "Take me to him," and we all went to the tomb. When we got there he was overcome with grief again as they all wept together for a while- so sad.

Then all the sudden he said, "Take the stone away from the door." I wasn't sure I heard him right, and Martha said to him, "Lord, we can't do that. It's been four days and the smell will be terrible." **"Didn't you say you believed in me? If you do you will see the glory of God right here!"** So she told them to go ahead and take the stone away.

Then Jesus looked up to heaven and prayed with his hands outstretched, **"Father, thank you that you always hear me, especially for the sake of these people here that they may believe that you sent me."** Then, in a loud, authoritative voice he shouted, **"Lazarus, come out!"** You could hear everyone gasp at the same time. What was he doing? This can't be! What happened next we couldn't believe. Just then the dead man walked out of that tomb, exactly as they had laid him, still wrapped up in the winding clothes from head to toe. Nothing like this had ever happened! Then he said, "Get those burial clothes off him and let him go free." When they got them off, Lazarus was alive and well, like nothing at all had happened.

I thought what he did for me was the greatest thing in the world, but this, it was beyond anyone's wildest imagination. Only God himself could do such a thing. This Jesus was no ordinary teacher, not a crazy rabbi as I had thought. **HE IS GOD HIMSELF IN THE FLESH. HE CAME TO SET US ALL FREE FROM SIN AND DEATH; TO LIVE WITHOUT FEAR, TO LIVE A WHOLE NEW KIND OF LIFE, FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT OF HOPE. THERE IS NOTHING GOD CANNOT DO!**

Since then, a lot has happened. The Priests and scribes got their way; they got rid of him, they thought. But, as he promised, he came back for us. They may not see him anymore, but the rest of us know he is still here. He gave us life you can't get any other way. You have to die to your old life in order to live it. I thought I had everything after he healed me, but it was nothing compared to what I have today. We are free, because He is alive in us. You know, old Lazarus died later, but it wasn't like the first time. They weren't sad or scared. Instead, it was a celebration, moving from this GLORIOUS LIFE into THE GLORIOUS LIFE ETERNAL.

Death is nothing. We're not scared to death anymore. It's just the door from one room into a much larger room where we get to spend forever together with him. What are you scared of? Trust in Jesus. He has already defeated death and taken care of everything for you. I can't wait. How about you?