

Ready or not (John 11:1-45)

by [Frederick A. Niedner](#) in the [February 26, 2008](#) issue

A generation ago, Ernest Becker taught us that the fear of dying is the mainspring of all human activity, from our smallest efforts at survival to our loftiest cultural achievements. So far as I can tell, our species continues to confirm that thesis. Even if it bankrupts Social Security, takes down Medicare and leaves half the population requiring assisted living quarters, most of us want to live as long as possible, and we order our lives accordingly.

Never mind that we don't know what we'd do with all the extra time we'd have if our lives stretched on for decades. As the late British novelist Susan Ertz observed, "Millions long for immortality who don't know what to do on a rainy Sunday afternoon." Yet we exercise, pay for medical plans, support cancer research, enforce seat belt laws and work in countless other ways to stave off dying.

God gets drafted as an ally in this effort when we pray for our own and others' health and healing and use God's name to support any cause that preserves and prolongs life. Unwittingly, perhaps, we reduce God to the role of personal bodyguard one day and house doctor the next. When God falls short at these responsibilities and someone dies too soon, we complain, sue or even fire this failed guardian.

Mary and Martha knew the drill. Accordingly, they had harsh words for Jesus, who had lollygagged on his way to Bethany despite Lazarus's grave illness and their desperation. Unwelcome as this explanation may prove in any generation, Jesus simply had a different agenda. When he heard their urgent plea, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather, it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Hence, the narrator explains, despite his love for this family, Jesus deliberately lingered for two more days before responding.

To understand Jesus' behavior and the opportunity he sees in all this, we must recognize that in John's Gospel, *glory* and *glorified* are code words for the crucifixion. In this Gospel, Jesus dies death by exaltation, and his crucifixion is the hour of his glorification (cf. John 12:31-33; 13:31). Lazarus's illness will lead to death, all right; when Jesus finally does arrive, his friend's corpse will stink to high heaven. But

something much larger will have begun. Lazarus's death will help to bring on Jesus' crucifixion, aka his glorification—and not only his, but God's.

In one way, what happens next makes the whole story look like a conventional miracle of the sort that healers of many nations and peoples have done over the centuries, including prophets such as Elijah and Elisha. Jesus finally comes to Lazarus's tomb, calls the dead man out and restores him to his family. The larger view, however, includes the narrator's note that the raising of Lazarus didn't please everyone. Instead, it became the best reason yet for destroying not only Jesus, but also Lazarus (John 11:53; 12:9-11).

How odd that Jesus would raise his friend from death only to enroll him in a brief venture that would get them both killed. Jesus might as well have shouted into that tomb, "Ready or not, here I come! Get ready for some company, Lazarus." That's precisely where Jesus was headed. In a few more days, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus would lay Jesus in a tomb, dead as a doornail but at the same time glorified almost beyond recognition.

To all the rest of us, Jesus' summons at the tomb where each of us will one day lie sounds something like this: "Come out of there, friend. Come with me. We're going up to Jerusalem. So much for ordinary dying from disease, accidents or plain wearing out. So much for living with the sole agenda of not dying and desperately extending our days. Let's go instead to where we can give our lives away. Come die with me."

This command comes, of course, not merely in some final moment in a grassy graveyard, but every day of our lives. We die every day, as each day wears us down, defeats us and brings us ever closer to the first tomb Lazarus knew. But we also die in the waters of baptism. Like Lazarus, we die with Christ.

Here John's story of Jesus and Lazarus becomes another allegory about baptism. Like Lazarus, the baptized also rise and respond to the call to head out for some place in space and time where we can give away our lives. We find ourselves terribly hindered, however, by the grave clothes that still bind us. We can't walk the walk of the resurrected when we're still bound by the old habits that the fear of dying has taught us so well.

Thankfully, we find ourselves in a community to which Jesus can say, "Unbind him. Let her go." These verbs don't merely refer to a way of undressing someone from an ancient burial dress in a baptismal rite. We find them as well in several of Jesus'

directives to go out and make the forgiveness of sins the new calling of the community (John 20:23; Matt. 18:18). Even as Jesus himself stuck around to help the blind man in John 9 adjust to a world of light and sight, so now the community to whom Christ entrusts the newly raised in baptism, that group we call the body of Christ, assists us daily in stripping off the binding remnants of the old life in death's dominion.

Naked as jaybirds, we head off to get ourselves glorified. Ready or not, here we come!