

A savior, not a hero: Jesus never shows up too late

I know what Jesus is doing in this story; I have three small children. He's dawdling.

by [Shannon Craig-Snell](#) in the [July 22, 2015](#) issue



Raising of Lazarus, Russian icon, 15th century.

The story of Lazarus in the Gospel of John describes a God who comes too late. Mary and Martha, concerned for their brother Lazarus, send word to Jesus, but he does not go immediately to their home in Bethany. He stays where he is for two more days.

When Jesus and the disciples finally get near Bethany, Martha runs out to meet Jesus and to tell him that Lazarus has died. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”

Martha is a faithful woman. She says Jesus could have saved Lazarus before he died, but she also asks implicitly for Jesus to save him now. Lazarus by now has been in

his tomb for four days, and Martha still believes Jesus can save him. Jesus does not respond by granting her request. Instead, he preaches to her: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live." Martha then runs back to get Mary.

Let's get this straight. Jesus is told his friend is sick and he doesn't come. Two days pass. He starts on his way to Lazarus. At least two more days pass, because by the time Jesus arrives in the vicinity of Bethany, Lazarus has been dead for four days. Martha comes to talk to him, then goes to get Mary, then she sends Mary back, and when Mary gets to Jesus, he still hasn't moved. What is he doing all this time?

I know what Jesus is doing. He's dawdling. I have three small children, and I know what dawdling looks like. My kids will intend to go somewhere—say, to the car—and there will be no impediments to their progress, but still, it takes 15 minutes to get out the door. Their intention does not change—at any moment they would tell you they are on the way to the car—but they make extremely slow progress.

Jesus dawdles until Mary gets to him and says the same thing her sister did, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus is moved by Mary's weeping and eventually calls for the stone closing Lazarus's tomb to be moved away.

Perhaps Martha is thinking at this point that Jesus wants to mourn over the body, and she gently tells him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Perhaps she is not gentle at all, but sternly reminds Jesus that if he wanted to be with Lazarus, the time for that was four days ago. In either case, we have no indication that she is still holding out hope for Jesus to save her brother. That moment came and went. But of course, that's exactly what Jesus does: "Lazarus, come out!"

Aristotle, one of the earliest and most influential commentators on theater, says that tragedy happens when the heroic character meets with disaster at the end of the story. He contrasts this with comedy, in which the characters go to the very brink of disaster but are snatched back again to safety.

Comedy, in Aristotle's terms, only works because we live in a world where tragedy is commonplace. People go to the brink of various disasters and careen over the cliff every day. It is because we are used to tragedy that we find comedy exhilarating.

Aristotle defines comedy differently than we do today. His comedy doesn't have to be funny. In fact, the contemporary stories that best fit within his notion of comedy are adventure stories where a hero shows up in the nick of time to save the day.

The Christian gospel is neither tragedy nor comedy. As much as Mary and Martha would like him to, Jesus does not show up in the nick of time. The nick of time comes and goes, the characters careen right over that cliff, and still Jesus does not show up. The disaster is not averted—Lazarus dies, and parts of his sisters die with him. Then, only then, after the body has begun to rot in the grave, does Jesus arrive. Only then, after even Martha has given up hoping that her brother might be saved, does Jesus command Lazarus to come out of the tomb.

This is not tragedy—the story does not end in suffering. Nor is it comedy—disaster is not avoided. It is gospel—death both endured and conquered.

Jesus is not the hero the sisters so desperately wish for. He does not save the day. He does not even arrive on the day! Mary and Martha are not spared the suffering of their brother's death. They grieve and mourn and face a future without him. Then, only then, does Jesus arrive, and redeem the disaster that has already struck.

Jesus says that the illness Lazarus had “does not lead to death,” and then he states plainly, “Lazarus is dead.” This makes no sense in the world of comedy and tragedy, where illness either leads to death or it doesn't. But it does make sense in the world of gospel. The illness does not lead to death, but through it. The fact that Lazarus dies does not mean that death is his final destination.

In this story there is hard news and there is good news. Jesus is not a hero who will always save us from suffering and death. He will not show up in the nick of time to avert disaster. And death, even though it is not our destination, is a stop on every journey and colors much of the landscape through which we travel. That's the hard news.

The good news is this: Jesus is not a hero—he's a savior. That means it is never too late for him to redeem. The nick of time can come and go, but that does not mean the opportunity for redemption is gone. The corpse can be rotting in the grave, and it is not too late for Jesus to bring life again. The flesh could be gone altogether, the bones completely dry, and still, it is not too late for the redeeming Word of God.

I wonder how Mary and Martha lived after their brother died and was returned to them. Did they live with abandon—confident that the perils of this earth are not permanent? Did they disregard risks, knowing that Jesus, the resurrection and the life, is more powerful than any sickness or injury?

Mary knew how much it hurt to lose her brother the first time. Martha saw how quickly his illness went from trivial to terrible. Both sisters witnessed his ragged last breath, and watched his body still. They knew how easily his life slipped away, and they felt some part of their own lives slip away with it. After all of that, could these sisters be carefree with the newly risen Lazarus? Or did they urge him to wear a scarf when he went out in the evening, lest he catch another chill?

I can imagine that they would have different responses: Martha heady with the wine of resurrection, Mary waiting for death's other shoe to drop.

The predicament these two women face is similar to our own. In a world of sin and brokenness, we are called to attend to human suffering, to take death—in all its many forms—seriously. We are also called to live in the promise of resurrection.

Theologian Karl Rahner writes that “a strange thing happens to the man who really loves, for even before his own death his life becomes a life with the dead.” The life of love becomes a life of grief.

Why do we do it, then? Why do we continue to open our hearts to other people in this world, flawed and finite dawdlers who will surely die? Rahner says that Christians do this on the strength of faith in grace. It is an act of faith to love another human being—a flawed, finite person who will no doubt die and take some part of us into death with them. The only way we can do this crazy thing, says Rahner, is if we really believe that death is not the final word, not our ultimate destination. Because we know that death is not the end, we can risk the death that comes with loving others.

Comedy makes sense only against a backdrop of tragedy. Because we expect the disaster, we are thrilled when it does not come. For Christians, love makes sense only against a backdrop of gospel. Because we know that death is finally conquered, we can take the risk of loving people who will surely die.