

The Lenten Journey of Gospel Nonviolence (Part 6)

John Dear | Mar. 11, 2008 On the Road to Peace

The story of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, a story of death and despair, life and hope, not only climaxes John's Gospel ([11:1-45, from last Sunday](#) [1]) before the last supper and death of Jesus, it sums up the work of God in the world -- to liberate humanity from the culture of death and call us forth into the new life of nonviolent love and resurrection peace.

In chapter 10, the devout Judeans tried to kill the unarmed Jesus. Now, upon hearing the news that his dear friend Lazarus is dying and then dead, Jesus announces that he is going to see Lazarus, which means he will walk right back to where his would-be assassins await him. This decision terrifies the disciples who fear getting killed (as we would too), and so they argue with Jesus. "Don't you realize those people are trying to kill you? We can't go back there!" they say. But notice: Jesus calls Lazarus, "*Our* friend." Lazarus is their friend too! "What are you willing to do for your friends?" Jesus asks. "Aren't you willing to lay down your life for your friends? Come, let's go."

For Jesus, laying down one's life for one's friends is not just a duty; it's natural. He loves everyone and is always willing to do what he can nonviolently for his friends, for every human being. Ashamed, the disciples agree to go with Jesus to Bethany. "Let us go and die with him," macho Thomas asserts. But what happens? They disappear! The 12 are nowhere to be seen in the rest of the story. They don't appear until the next chapter.

And so we are left to ponder Jesus walking alone to Bethany, right back into the crowd that had just tried to kill him, there to be with his friend. The vulnerable, unarmed, nonviolent Jesus walks alone.

Next, we read about the professional mourners, weeping over Lazarus. These are probably the same religious people who just threatened to kill Jesus, now fulfilling their religious obligation to mourn Lazarus. They show public sorrow for his death, yet their hearts are filled with murder. They are acolytes of the culture of death.

Then we meet Martha and Mary, the beloved disciples, the two heroic women who come closest towards accepting Christ. They have begun the ritual 30 days of mourning and they are beside themselves with grief.

Lazarus has been dead for four days. In their belief, the soul of the dead person leaves the body after three days. In effect, you could raise a person from the dead after two days, but after three days, don't bother. There's nothing there. Lazarus is dead four days now, which means, Lazarus is gone. Jesus is too late. There is nothing that can be done. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," they cry.

Such utter hopelessness sounds familiar. Deep down, we feel the same disappointment and faithlessness in Christ before the power of death in the world. "Lord, if you had been here," we mutter like Martha and Mary, "then perhaps so many of our relatives and friends, our sisters and brothers around the world, would not have died, would not be dying; then death would not hold power over us; then we would not wage war, support injustice, or hang on the nuclear brink." And the lonely, unarmed, vulnerable Jesus looks us in the eye and says: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever is alive here and now, and believes in me as I walk the way of life and confront the forces of death, will never die." And he puts the question to us: Do you believe this?

When Jesus sees Mary and the others weeping, he is deeply troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asks. The people of the culture of death are eager to show him the tomb. "Come and see," they tell him. These are the same precious words of invitation Jesus used at the beginning of John's Gospel to welcome his friends into his new way of life. Now the mourners seek to recruit Jesus in discipleship to the culture of death. When Jesus weeps, they shake their heads in disbelief. "If only he had done something!" This too sounds familiar. How often do we whisper, "If only he had done something"?

Nobody believes in Jesus. Everybody believes in death. How does this make Jesus feel? Jesus has given his life to everyone. He offers the fullness of life. He stands with the God of life -- and how is he received? He is rejected. "Hey, Jesus! Come and see our ways of death, our weapons, our wars, our nukes. Death? You'll love it!"

Jesus breaks down and weeps. As Wes Howard-Brook explains in *Becoming Children of God*, contrary to what we have been taught, Jesus does not weep because Lazarus has died. Earlier Jesus told us that he rejoices -- he is glad -- at the news of Lazarus' death. Maybe, Jesus thinks, just maybe, we will come to believe in him now. Instead, Jesus finds everyone given over to the control of death. And he breaks down crying.

Jesus weeps because everyone in the scene -- the disciples, the religious folk, even his beloved friends, Martha and Mary -- every one of them and all of us, believe not in the God of life but in the culture of death. Jesus weeps not because his friend has died, but because every drop of faith and hope has died. Similarly, all of us, like all the characters in the story, at one point or another, say, "I'm sorry Lord, there's nothing that can be done. There is no hope. You gave it a good try, Jesus, but death does get the last word."

But the story is not over! Jesus approaches the tomb. The image of Jesus walking towards the tomb stands as one of the great moments in history. Like the Chinese dissident student standing before a column of tanks in Tiananmen Square. Or Gandhi's nonviolent followers marching toward the Dharasana Salt Mines. Or Dr. King and the civil rights activists, facing the troops, the dogs and the fire hoses of Birmingham.

Jesus confronts death. There, standing before the tomb, Jesus is the God of life, the living God who issues the great commandments - "Thou shall not kill!" "Beat your swords into plowshares!" and "Love your enemies!" -- Jesus declares three new commandments.

First, "*Take away the stone!*" Martha pleads with him. "Not that, Lord! You don't understand: there's nothing that can be done. It's been four days now. Lazarus is gone; death has won. Please don't make us confront death. Please don't trouble yourself," which means, "Please don't trouble us anymore more, Jesus -- even if you are the Son of God." Finally, she blurts out, "For God's sake, think of the stench!"

Here we have the voice of total despair, the voice of no-hope-whatsoever, the voice which says, "Once you're dead, you're dead." This voice sounds all too familiar, because it resounds within each one of us. She does what we do: She resists the command to take away the stone. Why does she do that? Why do we resist this great commandment? Because we do not want resurrection. We do not want new life. We cannot handle that much hope, that much freedom and its social, economic and political implications. We are very comfortable with the culture of death. Resurrection? No thanks.

But Jesus insists: You can not afford the luxury of despair. Take away the stone! So, the stone is taken away and for the first time in all 11 chapters of John's Gospel, at this climactic moment, Jesus speaks directly to God. But instead of the prayer that Martha hoped for, in which she asserts that God will grant whatever Jesus asks, Jesus does not ask God for anything. Jesus does not pray, "Please raise Lazarus from the dead." He does not tell God what to do. Instead, he offers the most radical prayer of all. He simply says, "Thank you." To resist death, Jesus shows us, we have to be people of contemplative prayer, people who give thanks to the God of life.

Then, the second command, "Lazarus, come out!" Lazarus represents humanity, all of us buried in the tombs of the empire of death. "Leave your tombs!" Jesus shouts. "Come out from the power of death. Live free from the forces of death!"

Lazarus appears, but he is bound in burial clothes. He cannot hear, see, speak, reach out, or walk, actions which symbolize discipleship to Christ. Lazarus is still a victim of the culture. And so the third command: "Unbind him and let him go!"

Mark's Gospel offers the command to "bind the strong man," the forces of death. Here, we have the flip side -- unbind the weak and let them go free. Do the people do it? We do not know. The story is left unfinished. Lazarus still stands at the tomb waiting for us. Our task is to unbind humanity from the shroud of death and set it free to live in peace.

Jesus' raising of Lazarus symbolizes all the nonviolent struggles of liberation from oppression and death throughout history. It is the story of Dr. King and the civil rights movement calling forth African-Americans from the tomb of racial injustice and unbinding them. It is the story of Nelson Mandela and the resisting masses ordering the stone of apartheid taken away, in the face of total despair, and the South African people coming forward. It is the story of Dorothy Day and her Catholic Worker friends refusing to take cover in fallout shelters during nuclear war air-raid practice drills.

It is our story too, in every effort to abolish war, poverty, nuclear weapons, global warming and violence. In New Mexico, where we are surrounded by death, from poverty to Los Alamos' nuclear weapons, our Pax Christi groups are preparing for our annual Hiroshima day events, this year featuring Sr. Helen Prejean (Aug. 1-2, see: www.paxchristinewmexico.org). We will roll away the stone, call each other forth from nuclear death and give thanks to the God of peace for the new life of resurrection.

Jesus commands us: Take away the stone that keeps you entombed in the culture of death. Call each other out of the tombs into the new life of resurrection. Unbind one another and let everyone go free to live in peace, love and nonviolence. Do not despair.

We all know despair. We think: "There is nothing that can be done. We will always have war, poverty, nuclear weapons and global warming. We will always be violent. Death is in control. Militarism rules the land, violence rules our hearts." But the voice of Jesus rings out across the centuries: "Take away the stone. Come out of your tombs. Unbind the oppressed and let them go. Live and let live. From now on, you are free of despair and the culture of death. Live in hope, in the new life of resurrection and give thanks to the God of peace." That is the mission for the rest of our lives.

For further reflections on Gospel nonviolence, see John Dear's books, *Jesus the Rebel*, *The Questions of Jesus* and *Transfiguration*, (all available from www.amazon.com [2]). To order a DVD about John, see: www.sandamianofoundation.org [3]. To attend one of his lectures, see: www.johndear.org [4].

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