

## WAS LAZARUS A ZOMBIE?

If the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead were not in the Bible, smack in the middle of John's gospel, we might think it was the synopsis of a grade B horror movie.

You really ought to read the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of John; it will only take you about ten minutes. Then you will discover for yourself that it is so outlandish and spooky we would have a hard time taking it seriously.

Consider: The hero and his band of followers have left the capital city to avoid the police, apparently something about a ruckus over violating the Sabbath blue laws.

While their group is camping across the river in a neighboring territory they learn that one of their main supporters is deathly ill. The sick man and his two sisters make up a family of whom the hero is particularly fond. In fact, according to the script, he *loves* them.

But instead of going to their aid, the hero procrastinates for forty-eight hours. Only then does he announce that they will visit the man's village, which is but a suburb of the same urban center where they are *persona non grata*.

Earlier the leader had suggested that the man's sickness was not terminal. Now he says the man in question must have fallen asleep. His followers take this to mean that the man's fever has broken, so now he can rest more peacefully and will soon be well again.

So the leader (that would be Jesus) speaks plainly, "Lazarus is dead." Then he adds, "Now let's go and see what we can do." So the rest of the men (that would be his disciples) agree to go along, even though it means putting their lives at risk.

So they finally arrive at the village (that would be Bethany) four days after the funeral. One of the dead man's sisters (that would be Martha) intercepts him on the road. And she starts to complain: "If you had gotten here when you first heard the news, maybe my brother wouldn't be dead."

They exchange words about the resurrection and so forth, and then Martha goes and tells her sister (that would be Mary) that Jesus has arrived. So Mary goes out to meet him. And she has the same

complaint: "If you had been here our brother wouldn't be dead."

You ever had that experience? Something goes terribly wrong, and we start blaming other people, or ourselves, or the victim, or God. "If only the doctors had caught it in time." "If only we had seen the signs." "If only she hadn't got lost." "If only he hadn't had that last drink." "If only you had been here, our brother might still be alive."

It gets to you, doesn't it? Well, it gets to Jesus, too. He sees the sisters crying. He sees their neighbors crying. He starts to cry. "He must have really loved the man," they say, "but if he could heal a blind man. . . . If only he had been here. . . ."

So they go to the cemetery, and Jesus tells them to open the door to the mausoleum. "You've got to be kidding," says Martha. "It's been four days. It is going to stink!" You ever sniffed something that's been dead for a couple of days? One whiff of the stench will make your stomach turn right over.

But Jesus insists. He says a little prayer. They roll away the stone. "Lazarus!" he hollers into the cave, "Here! Outside!" And out of the darkness floats the corpse—head, hands, arms, legs, feet wrapped tight with the shroud. "Somebody unwind him," says Jesus. "Let him loose!"

You have to wonder: Who will be brave enough to start pulling off those bandages? And what did they expect to see when they got the grave cloths off? A zombie, or what?

Obviously the author of this gospel wanted this incident to illustrate a larger theological truth, namely, that Jesus is what he says he is, namely, "the resurrection and the life."

But the bizarre details of this story are the stuff of which nightmares are made. If nothing else, it can shock you into confronting the reality of death. For at least a few minutes you will be challenged to think about the finality of all things, including your own self.

Which is such not a bad thing for any of us. And if it forces us to think about the possibilities of life after death, so much the better.