

Raised from the Dead: A New Lease on Life

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Over the last six weeks we've been looking at some of the healing miracles that the Lord performed while He was alive on earth,¹ and now we come to the final miracle in the series — raising someone from the dead.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is one of the longest accounts of a miracle available to us in the Word, and it's filled with drama, back-and-forth action, and human emotion. Aside from the Lord's own death and resurrection, it's arguably the greatest miracle the Lord ever performed. Causing the blind to see, the lame to walk, the lepers to be cleansed, and the deaf to hear are all great miracles in themselves, but bringing someone back to life who has died, *that* is something different. And remember, Lazarus had been dead for four days! That's a full day beyond the Lord's own resurrection (which happened on the third day after His crucifixion) *and* it's a full day longer than it takes any human being fully to transition into the spiritual world. The point is that this was no near-death experience that Lazarus was having; He really was dead and gone; his life was over; and for the Lord to bring him back to life at that point was an incredible miracle.

This kind of death is something that can happen in our own lives as well, especially in friendships and relationships:

- Two young girls meet on a playground and they become instant friends. Some years later they both get romantically interested in the same boy, and their friendship comes to an end.
- A young couple that is dating or engaged experience their first disagreement or argument. In the heat of the moment words are exchanged that cut deeply, or each person simply misunderstands the other in some significant way. Both of them go away feeling very hurt, enough so that they may doubt that the relationship can continue—something in their relationship feels like it has died.
- Or how about in marriage?—times when we bump up against some obstacle to the relationship or meet some impasse, or one person does or says something that seems so offensive or hurtful, and there just doesn't seem to be a way past it. Maybe things have gone downhill slowly over the years, and it feels like things have reached a point of no return in which one or both people wonder how they could ever feel genuine love for the other

¹ The ones mentioned by Jesus in Matt. 11:5 and Luke 7:22.

person again. Maybe they're sure that they can't. "This relationship is over. It is dead and gone! Four days in the grave and it's not coming back!" This is an awful place to be.

But feelings of death, or a thought that something we truly care about is dead and gone isn't reserved only for friendships and relationships with other people. They can also happen in our relationship with the Lord, and also in our own individual lives — times when we may doubt our own ability to change and improve—at home, at work, or in our own individual regeneration. These too can be very dark times.

One of the beautiful things about the story of Lazarus is the quality of the key people involved: Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. They were siblings, and all of them were good people, enough so that it says the Lord loved each one of them.² He also counted Lazarus as His friend.³

These facts about the story remind us that each one of us has a "Lazarus," "Mary," and "Martha" part of us. We have a good conscience, for example, about relationships or things in our lives that feel like they're dead or dying. All the way along we may have *wanted* things to work out and improve. We've *wanted* to know what we could do to help make things better. Maybe we've even tried different things that we've learned, perhaps within or outside of the New Church, but somehow they just haven't seemed to work, or they haven't worked as fully as we might have hoped. And because of our good conscience and good efforts along the way, we may reach a time where we look back over our lives and wonder how we ever got to this point.

At times we may also wonder where the Lord has been in all of it; and we might say to Him (like Martha and Mary each did) "If you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." In other words, "If You had been here in this situation, this wouldn't have happened." "Couldn't You, who opened the eyes of the blind, have kept it from happening?"

....

But this whole series that we've been involved in over the last six weeks has been about miracles, health, and healing, and it's been built around a premise which says that the Lord is able to work miracles in our lives.⁴

Just think, for example (in the realm of relationships) how many people or couples you've heard describe cold or dark times in their relationships—times that felt so cold and distant that they thought the relationship was dead and gone. But they kept working at it, and in the end things

² John 11:2-3,5,36

³ John 11:11

⁴ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Apocalypse Explained* 815:4

turned around. The coldness went away and life returned to the relationship; and when it did, it felt like an absolute miracle!

This reminds me of one New Church couple who I've told you about before, and who tell their story publically. They reached a point in their marriage where they were sure their relationship was over—four days dead and gone! But they were determined to honor their marriage commitment, so each of them (on their own) decided to help one another in their life and in their spiritual walk, and in this way, each intended to help the other prepare for their eventual marriage (to someone else) in heaven. And what they discovered was that as each of them worked from that charitable standpoint, the coldness they felt toward one another melted away. They fell back in love, and at last report they said they now love one another more than they ever have before. Four days dead and gone!...and the Lord worked a miracle.

And actually, a belief that the Lord can work a miracle in our lives is the real turning point around which the whole story of Lazarus revolves. Martha said to Jesus, "If You had been here, my brother would not have died." But regardless of what she thought or felt at that moment in time, she *also* said, "But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give you."

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day," (which for us may equate to, "Yeah, someday I'll die and go to heaven and my life will get better then—but not now.") But Jesus kept her focus on the present moment and on His ability to work a miracle in the here-and-now. Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die yet he shall live, and whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die." Then He added, "Do you believe this?"

She said to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God."

What these things show us is that the story of Lazarus is first and foremost a story about our belief in the Lord. Eight times in the story a form of the word belief occurs; three times it is stated in other terms; and ten times it is implied by people's actions...for a total of *twenty-one* times in the space of forty-seven verses.⁵

And what is the belief that is being talked about? It is a belief that the Lord can work a miracle in our life and in relationships. No matter where we're at, and no matter how bad things may have gotten over time, the Lord can turn things around. Four days dead and gone!...and the Lord can work a miracle.

⁵ See John 11:2-48.

Here's a teaching for the New Church which says this:

[While the Lord was on earth, He healed people] according to their faith, because the first and primary things [in the establishment or re-establishment] of the church [in any human being or relationship is] to believe that the Lord is God Almighty, that He has power to heal and save [or, in other words, that] He is able to do miracles.⁶

When you personally experience a time in life when you feel like something you care about is dead and gone, never to recover, do you believe that the Lord can work a miracle in your life? Often this belief is something that can jumpstart a new beginning.

But this belief is only the starting point of any miracle that the Lord works. The second thing we need to do is see if there is anything in *ourselves* that is contributing to the problem we're facing or the death we're experiencing.

The story of Lazarus begins with the fact that Lazarus was *sick*; and that sickness was what led to his death. Lazarus' sickness symbolizes any of the natural reactions we can have, or the patterned responses we make, to people or situations in our lives which, if not treated, can lead to death. It also symbolizes any personal weakness or fault that we bring to a relationship and that we need to work on. In the realm of relationships, examples of these natural tendencies might include:

- A tendency to avoid confrontation at all costs.
- A tendency to withdraw or shut down in silence when we feel hurt, or at the opposite pole, a natural tendency to attack and dominate.
- A tendency toward perfectionism which might make it hard for other people to live with us.
- A desire to be noticed, appreciated, cherished, or approved of which turns nasty or demanding when not satisfied by our partner.
- A defensive streak.
- Unhealthy jealousy.
- A natural tendency to hold grudges.
- Etc.
- Or any patterned ways of thinking that justify these things or cause us not to see or acknowledge them in ourselves.

It's interesting: The reference to Mary washing Jesus' feet in the second verse of this story reminds us of the need to be cleansed of these natural tendencies or patterned responses. What this means is that in order for us to be "raised from the dead," we often have to go through a kind of spiritual death—one in which we consciously choose to give up some habitual

⁶ Swedenborg, *Apocalypse Explained* 815:3-4, *Heavenly Secrets* 10083:5

way of thinking, feeling, or functioning in life that is part of the problem in the first place. As Jesus said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bear much grain.”

So in the end, this story is just as much about us passing through the death of natural and selfish tendencies into renewed life as it is about waking up from states of mind and life that *feel* dead. In the end, this story is about how we die unto different parts of *ourselves* so that we, and the relationships we care about, can be resurrected and live.

This fact of life was just as true in the Lord’s own life on earth as it is in ours, where the Lord Himself was determined to undergo spiritual and also natural death and to rise again. In order to go through the spiritual part of death and resurrection, He had to put off all of the natural human tendencies that each of us faces in relationships and, in His case, to take on a Divine Human in its place (which for us is new life through spiritual rebirth or regeneration).⁷

And notice one thing that happened at the end of this story: When the time arrived for Jesus to raise Lazarus from the dead, He lifted up His eyes and prayed; then He cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth!” And when Lazarus came out of the tomb, Jesus said to the people who were there, “Loose him, and let him go.”

This part of the story isn’t directly expounded in the New Church, but on a spiritual level it seems to represent words of encouragement from the Lord to *get up*, move forward, move through, and get *beyond* any state of death we’ve been experiencing, roll away the stone from our heart, and remove the grave clothes of false thinking that bind us hand and foot.

The final thing we’ll focus on in this story is the idea that the work of cooperating with the Lord to be raised from the dead is something that requires humility. This shows itself, not only in the fact that Mary had at one time wiped Jesus’ feet with her hair, but also in the fact that when Jesus arrived on the scene to raise Lazarus from the dead, Mary fell at His feet.

Along these lines, let me read to you a beautiful teaching for the New Church which talks about this. It says,--

Humility before another person produces a bowing down, according to the estimation of him or her; but in presence of the Divine it produces total prostration, especially when a person thinks that the Divine in respect to power and wisdom is everything, and oneself in comparison is nothing, or that from the Divine is all good and from oneself nothing but what is hurtful and bad (i.e., evil). When a person is in this acknowledgment from the heart he or she comes as it were out of him- or herself, and thence falls upon

⁷ *Apocalypse Explained* 899:11-14

his face, and when he is thus out of himself he is also removed from the what is his own, which in itself is totally bad (evil). And when this is removed, the Divine fills him and raises him up. For the only thing that stands in the way, is what hurtful and bad.⁸

So, over the last six weeks we've walked through a progression of miracles toward spiritual health and healing. We've asked the Lord to open our eyes to see, heal over spiritual lameness so that we could walk in new ways cleanse us of the impurities symbolized by leprosy, grant us the ability to hear the Lord speak to us and the willingness to obey, and finally now, to raise us up through states of spiritual death into new life.

I'd like to end this series by reading one final teaching for the New Church which talks about the potential of salvation for people of all nations, faiths, and cultures. As I read this passage, in place of the word "nation" you might think of the potential for human improvement or the potential of salvation for any relationship. In fact, let me insert these extra words into the reading. We read,--

There is not a nation, [person, or relationship] in the world that may not be saved if people acknowledge God and live well. They have all been redeemed by the Lord, and [every person or relationship] has an ability to receive the gift of redemption. Those [people or relationships] who receive the Lord, that is, have faith in Him and do not live a hurtful life, are called Sons of God, born of God, children of the kingdom,...and so they are angels.⁹ Amen.

⁸ *Apocalypse Explained* 77

⁹ John 1:12-13, John 11:52, Matthew 13:38, Job 1:6 & 2:1, respectively, quoted from Swedenborg, *True Christianity* 729

Readings: Luke 7:18-23; Luke 16:19-21; John 11:1-45

The sicknesses which the Lord healed while He was on earth have as their meaning deliverance from the different kinds of evil and falsity that were molesting the Church and human race, and that would have brought spiritual death. (*Arcana Caelestia* 8364:6)

In the stories of the Word, the Lord healed people according to their faith, because the first and primary thing of the church then to be established was to believe that the Lord is God Almighty, for without that faith no church could have been established. We read in John, “When Lazarus was dead, his sister said, ‘Lord, by this time he stinks.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not say to you, “If you would believe you would see the glory of God?”’” (John 11:39-40). From this it is clear that it was faith in the Lord's omnipotence that healed people. (*Apocalypse Explained* 815:2-4,6)

The words of Scripture, “He who is washed has no need except that his feet be washed” means that anyone who has been reformed needs to be cleansed only in regard to natural things, that is, to have evils and falsities removed from him or her. For when that happens all is ordered by the influx of spiritual things from the Lord. Furthermore “feet-washing” was an act of charity...and also an act of humility, as also becomes clear from John 11:2 [which refers to Mary anointing Jesus with oil and wiping] His feet with her hair. (*Arcana Caelestia* 3147:8)

“To wash the feet” means to purify the natural person; and when this is purified, the whole person is also purified. The natural person, which is also the external person, is purified when he or she shuns the evils which the spiritual or internal person sees to be evils and that they ought to be shunned. The natural part of a person perverts all things if it is not washed or purified. (*Apocalypse Revealed* 49:5-6)

In the story of Lazarus the Lord said, “Are there not twelve hours of the day? If a man walks in the day he does not stumble” (John 11:9). These words mean that one who is living in any kind of truth from good is in illustration, and does not stray into falsities. (*Apocalypse Explained* 430:16)