

## **Believe It or Not! The Plot to Kill a Man Who Had Already Died?** Sunday, 7/17/22

Last week we grappled with the apparent nonchalance with which Paul and his fellow believers greeted the resurrection of Eutychus. Like Paul, shouldn't we faithfully expect to find God at work in the world rather than be surprised by miracles and answered prayer? Shouldn't we ourselves become God's agents of answered prayer, following in the footsteps of the disciples before us, imitating the ministry of Jesus?

How many of you are old enough to remember something about the day president Kennedy was shot? That was November 22, 1963. I was two-years old, so you can count me out. How about when Martin Luther King, jr was shot? That was on April 4, 1968. Nope, still too early for me. How about when President Reagan was shot? I remember that quite well. It was March 30, 1981. I was 19 years old.

Long before the advent of school shootings, drive-by shootings, supermarket shootings, and the like, there were political shootings, otherwise known as assassinations. And before shootings there were stabbings. The murder of Julius Caesar on March 14, 44 BC by a group of senators comes to mind.<sup>1</sup>

Assassinations typically involve the killing of a well-known leader for the purpose of scoring a political advantage. Today, we'll consider the unusual account of the plot to kill Lazarus, the man who had already died but had been raised to life by Jesus. It's unusual in that although it was a politically motivated hit, there was nothing about Lazarus himself that warranted the attention of his would-be killers. Rather, it was his association with Jesus that earned him sudden notoriety as well as a contract to be killed.

Thankfully, we worship a God who has a breathtaking ability to redeem evil circumstances, and so even in the conspiracy to kill Lazarus we can find meaning and hope for our lives today.

Did you know that the Coptic Orthodox Church begins their observation of Holy Week on Saturday instead of Palm Sunday? That's right, they call it "Lazarus Saturday."<sup>2</sup> That's because Lazarus was raised only days before Jesus was arrested, crucified, and then raised again. The timing was no accident. Jesus could have come to Bethany much earlier,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/the-plot-to-kill-lazarus/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.franthony.com/blog/want-kill-lazarus>

either to heal Lazarus, or to raise him from the grave. After all, his body had been decaying in the hot tomb for four days! But timing is everything, and Jesus knew that he would be entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and facing his own death on Friday. Jesus wanted resurrection to be fresh on everyone's mind as he entered Jerusalem,<sup>3</sup> with absolutely no doubt concerning his claim in John 11:25 that "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying."<sup>4</sup>

Isn't this also the reason we celebrate Easter every year, to be reminded that because Jesus rose, we will rise as well? In truth, every Sunday is a "little Easter" for Christians, because the resurrection life offered us by Christ isn't a once-a-year party, but a way of life that colors everything we do in worship. More than that, it's a way of life that informs our being every day. That's why I've suggested before that you try greeting each day as if you were rising from the grave. If you haven't tried that yet, please do.

The resurrection of Lazarus wasn't greeted with joy by everyone, and it didn't take long for a plot to hatch to kill him again! We're continuing our reading in John, chapter 12, beginning with verse 1 in the New Living Translation. **{Read John 12:1-11 NLT}**

It's no accident that the resurrection of Lazarus took place in Bethany, only about two miles outside of Jerusalem, the seat of power for the Jewish authorities who were plotting to kill both Jesus and Lazarus. The resurrection of Lazarus was one final, dramatic miracle offered to everyone that Jesus was truly the Son of God. And although many came to believe in him, the leading priests conspired to kill him.

Why? Because Lazarus was walking, talking proof that Jesus was God! More and more of the Jews who obeyed the priests were believing in Jesus, and they felt their political control slipping away, so they conspired to kill Jesus, as well as Lazarus, the evidence they couldn't afford to have seen. It was a political hit job on Jesus, and an attempted cover up with the plot to kill Lazarus.

Notice in our second reading how often John refers to the miracle, twice describing Lazarus as "the man Jesus raised from the dead."<sup>5</sup> In fact, it's in Lazarus's home that the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.andysavage.com/blog/posts/kill-the-proof>

<sup>4</sup> John 11:25. New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)

<sup>5</sup> John 12:1, 9. Ibid

dinner party was happening. At the end of the scene, John leaves no doubt about the reason for the plot to kill Lazarus, saying “for it was because of him that many of the people had deserted them and believed in Jesus.”<sup>6</sup>

I’m guessing that you’ve never been challenged to imitate Lazarus before, but that’s exactly what I’m going to do today. No, I don’t want you to die this week, but I do want you to be the living proof that Jesus is the Son of God, and that Jesus is the Resurrection and Life!

There’s a country song that’s sometimes played at funerals called “Live Like You Were Dying.” You’ve all heard that phrase. It means to live life to its fullest. It’s a good song. I especially like the part where he says he was finally the father he wanted to be, and that he learned to love more deeply.

But I ‘d rather you didn’t live like you were dying. Instead, I want you to live like you have died and been raised back into new life! There’s a difference. Living like you’re dying implies that you’re satisfying your own agenda, making the most of your own priorities. It’s ultimately focused on ourselves, no matter how virtuous some of the agenda items might be.

In contrast, to live like you have died and been brought back to new life is to be reborn with a fresh appreciation of life and the one who gives it to us. To be reborn is to have a heart of gratitude and wonder, worshipping and serving Jesus and his agenda, not out of ritual, obligation, or fear, but out of joyful love.

You may have noticed that being living proof that Jesus is alive and has the power to offer life to others isn’t always a ticket to popularity with friends and family. Like the conspiring priests, there are some people for whom no amount of evidence will be sufficient, because their hearts have become hardened to the invitation of Jesus. And as we live in an increasingly secular country, there seems to be more hostility to the Gospel.

Paradoxically, it’s only when we surrender our lives to Jesus and allow God’s Spirit to transform us from the inside-out that we can find true success in this world, because we were all created to worship and serve God. And there are no secret agents for God. We become salt and light when we live our faith out loud, sometimes with words, but always with

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<sup>6</sup> John 12:11. Ibid

actions that promote God's love and justice.

What are some practical ideas for living a "Lazarus" life? You have to start with reclaiming the new life you received at your baptism. Without being born again by the Spirit of Christ, you simply have nothing authentic of God to share with the world. If you're struggling with bearing the fruit of the Spirit in your life, you should probably stop trying so hard and focus on surrendering your life to God. I can recommend to you some basic prayers of surrender if you like. I mentioned before the practice of greeting each morning as if you'd just risen from the grave.

How about growing in your public prayer life? So many of us are bashful when it comes to praying in front of others, even other family members. Start small by praying some written meal prayers, and then expand your range as you grow more comfortable with talking with God out loud.

How about sharing your faith on Facebook, or other social media platforms? I don't mean you should post your article of beliefs, but simply acknowledge how much you depend on the grace of Jesus and the power for living that's given in the Holy Spirit.

Here's a harder one: Describe the person you want to be for God, and then compare it with how others might experience you based on only your visible actions. Do you have some outward behaviors that are sabotaging your witness to Jesus? Are there other behaviors, like acts of selfless love, that you'd like to demonstrate more often? Make a small goal and take it from there. By the way, if you're going to try this, it really helps to have a partner to share accountability with as well as different perspectives.

The conspiracy to kill Lazarus (again) was as absurd then as it seems today. No plans hatched out of the darkness of the human heart can thwart the resurrection power of our Savior and King. That was good news back then, and it remains good news today. Do you believe that? Then why aren't we living more like Lazarus, raised into new life by the healing hand of Jesus? Delete your bucket list and start a new list, a Lazarus list. You've been reborn from the dead, now what are you going to do?

Please take some time now to reflect on what you would put on your "Lazarus List."



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