

**After** dying in a car crash, three friends go to Heaven for orientation. They are all asked the same question: "When you are in your casket, friends and family are mourning over you, what would you like to hear them say about you?"

The first chap immediately responds, "I would like to hear them say that I was one of the great doctors of my time, and a great family man."

The second says, "I would like to hear that I was a wonderful husband and school teacher who made a huge difference in our children of tomorrow."

The last Irishman thinks a minute and replies, "I'd like to hear them say..... LOOK, HE'S MOVING!!!!!"

**Suppose** you put yourself in the place of Lazarus in this story? There you are dead, lying in a tomb swathed in bandages and surrounded by darkness. then you hear a voice saying: '*Come out, Lazarus.*'

The songwriter Hank Williams has it:

*When your soul is weary and it seems you've lost your way  
Jesus is calling, calling night and day.....  
If the night is dark, you will soon see the day  
Jesus is calling, calling night and day*

But for some it is safer to stay in the darkness. How many counselling clients have I seen who have worked to that place where they are fully aware of the choices open to them, and yet prefer not to take the risks that change might bring upon them. Remaining in the dark place is safer.

And yet, as Will Thompson's hymn says::

*Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling,  
Calling for you and for me;  
See, on the portals He's waiting and watching,  
Watching for you and for me.  
Refrain:  
Come home, come home,  
You who are weary, come home;  
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling,  
Calling, O sinner, come home!*

*Shadows are gathering, deathbeds are coming,  
Coming for you and for me.  
Oh, for the wonderful love He has promised,  
Promised for you and for me!  
Though we have sinned, He has mercy and pardon,  
Pardon for you and for me.*

Confronted by the grief of his friends, Jesus can't contain himself. He too "breaks down and cries". His soul too is broken not only for his friend, but surely, for the whole human condition of death and suffering, a condition of which he himself will soon be acutely aware. But then the whole Gospel contains the assurance that death and grief and pain and sorrow are inextricably intertwined with new life and hope and joy.

Like Ezekiel before him, Jesus at that moment is looking at dark times. For Ezekiel, Israel was dead. Only a handful of exiles remained in Babylon with few memories, fewer hopes and a lot of hate for the people they blamed for all their problems. Jesus is overcome by his compassion for all those who feel hopeless in the face of corruption. Death is very real and it's very powerful, it hurts and destroys, and the tears of Jesus and his deeply troubled spirit sanctifies our own grief, pain and fear in the face of death. Despite our science and medical knowledge, death remains our greatest enemy.

But Ezekiel and Jesus saw something more: that God was Lord even over a dead Israel—and God alone can give new life and new direction. The spirit of the Lord cannot be stopped: even death could not destroy the purposes of God. Jesus is Lord of the living and the dead. That's the good news, that's what we Christians see that the world does not see.

And when the Spirit of God moves, things are never the same!

Israel never again became what it used to be or what it wanted to be. The dry bones formed into something very different, something less powerful, and less successful, but truer to its mission, than Israel had wanted, and hoped and prayed for. The promise of new life is not a promise that we are in charge and that we will get what we want. The promise is better than

that. Lazarus hardly led a comfortable life after he emerged from his tomb, with the Jews out to kill him!

The point is that **whatever** deaths are before us we have to choose between despair and trust; to give up or to go on; to abandon hope, or to let go in faith. That choice is not made for us, but it is offered to us. And that choice can be terribly hard. More than at any other time, the reality of death—death in whatever form—is a call to trust. “Come out” the Lord calls. “Come out” into different life, into new life. “Come out” into life unknown and unexplained. “Come out” in trust and in hope.

Charles Dickens, in *A Tale of Two Cities*:

*"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way."*

Dickens was writing about a time when the rich grew ever richer on the backs of the poor and the few squandered the resources of the many. He makes a social commentary which applies equally today as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century! But Dickens also point to the choice that God lays out before every human being...the choice we make of how we will view the world, the choice between death and life.

Can you see the significance of the symbolism of John's Gospel: Jesus went to Bethany which means by general consent "**House of Misery**" or "**Poor-house**" a place for lepers and people on the margins. And called out to Lazarus (which means God has helped!)

The whole point of the Christian message is that there is good news in it even for us today, in the here and now. That good news is that any day can be for us "the best of times," if we will answer the call to '*Come out, Lazarus*'.

**The worst of times**, the age of foolishness, the age of cynicism, the season of Darkness, the winter of despair, hopelessness...that is the view from the spiritual tomb. Wrapped up and sealed. The world must be dark, because dark is all you can see. You despair; you lie down on your bed and give your hearts over to the darkness because there seems to be no other answer. Jesus, along with your family and friends are outside crying for you!

Despair and fear are the workers of Satan that seal the tomb. The power of love is calling to you to come out. Come out of the tomb. Despair is a lie. Wherever God is, there is hope, and there is no place in heaven or on earth or even in the depths of hell, where God cannot go. You cannot be in a place or a condition where God cannot reach you.

"Where can I go from your Spirit?" asks the Psalmist. "Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,' even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day." No matter how dark your tomb, God can turn it into a womb of life.

Sarah Young, Jesus Calling, Enjoying Peace in His Presence:

*"COME TO ME with all your weaknesses: physical, emotional, and spiritual. Rest in the comfort of My Presence, remembering that nothing is impossible with Me. Pry your mind away from your problems so you can focus your attention on Me. Recall that I am able to do immeasurably more than all you ask or imagine. Instead of trying to direct Me to do this and that, seek to attune yourself to what I am already doing."*

"Come out of the tomb and into the Light! It is **the best of times**, it is the age of wisdom, it is the epoch of belief, it is the season of Light, it is the spring of hope, there is everything before us...Come out! Come out of your winter and into the Spring. When Lazarus came out of that tomb, Jesus then said, "Unbind him, let him go free." Jesus also says to each of us, "Be unbound and go free. Live with my life." (John 11:44)