

# Coming Attractions

[John 11: 1-45]

[Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the tomb.]

K Karpen, Sunday, March 13, 2005

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I have to admit that I am becoming a little anxious about the growing pressure to have movie theaters post the actual start time of their films. Right now, if you go to see a 7:40 film and arrive on time you get to see not only the latest Fandango ad and the Manhattan Mini-Storage Moose, but also a collection of previews, trailers, coming attractions.

These previews are not randomly selected; they are picked with the idea that a person who likes the feature film might be interested in at least some of the films whose trailers are thrown into the same can.

What's not to love about a preview? At no expense and little bother, you get a 90-second summary of an upcoming film. Sometimes that's enough! Sometimes that's more than enough! But fine! You get to save the \$10.50. We often make mental notes as the previews fly by: No. Maybe. Hmm. Interesting. I want to see that! Or I think we just did see that!

After all, chances are if a movie has 8 good lines, 7 of them have been stuffed into the trailer. More than that: A good set of previews tells you a great deal about the movie you're about to see. That's sometimes humbling. I've gone to see a film I personally thought of as artsy, thoughtful, intellectual even, only to discover halfway through the previews that the film's distributors had lumped it into a really different category.

The story of the raising of Lazarus, sitting exactly in the middle of John's Gospel, functions as a sort of preview for the Gospel's main event. The story of Lazarus is a kind of coming attraction for the death and resurrection of Jesus. If you like the story of Lazarus, if it moves you, intrigues you, excites you: You are really gonna love the resurrection! Come back on Easter!

If you find the story of Lazarus troubling, unpleasant, difficult to swallow, you may need to do a little more thinking, praying, researching, chatting before you spring for the feature. And why wouldn't you find it troubling? The raising of Lazarus deals with issues that are troubling and unpleasant and difficult to swallow! It deals with issues that are far more personal and difficult to talk about than things like sex and sin and money, those other great Biblical themes.

It deals with death. And haven't we all had about enough of that? It deals with guilt. I know most of us have had plenty of that! It deals with fear and insecurity. Stress and remorse.

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And that is completely leaving aside the fact that the story revolves around an outrageous miracle, and that it portrays a side of Jesus that might seem arrogant and unfeeling. But before you get tempted to take that 15-minute bathroom break, let me suggest that Lazarus is providing us with an opportunity. Lazarus gives us the chance to talk together as a family about topics many of our own families try hard to avoid.

Death's been on my mind a lot lately. My dad's getting close to it. A couple of weeks ago we had two funerals on a single weekend; this at a church that can go from year to year to year without a single one. I spent yesterday afternoon with Ruth, a woman I can only hope & pray is drawing near to the release of her own death, after years of debilitating illness.

Lazarus is dead. Good & dead. He could really have been any age, but you get the impression reading the story that he's a contemporary of Jesus. Not necessarily someone who's lived out a good long life with few regrets but someone whose death was so unanticipated Jesus is given little advance notice of it.

When he gets the notice, he doesn't come right away. He's far away, and he's busy. And John gives you the weird idea he wants to show off. He waits two days. And when he reaches Bethany, he's too late. Not only is he too late to care for his friend Lazarus in his illness, he's missed the funeral!

Of course, the funeral finds him. Martha first. Then Mary. Then all of Mary's friends wailing and weeping. And then come some of the most devastating words in scripture: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Martha says it to him. Then Mary, in the exact same words: "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." Is that faith or frustration? Or both? When somebody close to us dies, one of the first things we feel, no matter what we've done, or not done, is guilt. Whether or not we could have done more. We could always do more, I guess. It's a little late to think of it now...

Guilt. It doesn't help! It doesn't help our friend or brother or sister or parent or lover or child. But we go there. And too often we stay there. Interesting, though. Jesus doesn't go there. Jesus goes somewhere else. Jesus goes to his friend. Jesus goes to the tomb. Jesus goes to death itself and demands another chance. Another chance for Lazarus and another chance for himself.

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And when he goes to the tomb, first he weeps. Then he prays. Then he calls Lazarus out with a few well-chosen words, "Lazarus, come out." "Lazare, deuro exo."  
"Lazarus, come out."

Come out of death.  
Come out of bondage.  
Come out of guilt.  
Come out of decay.  
Come out of fear.  
Come back to life.  
Don't go yet. Don't go alone. Wait for me.

I wonder how long Lazarus lives. According to John, raising Lazarus is the act that puts the chief priests over the edge and makes them decide to get rid of Jesus. Then they decide they'd better get rid of Lazarus, too. Though we don't know whether they do that or not. That question gets pushed aside for the coming attraction: the death of Jesus.

Is Lazarus just called back from death for a different death? A more meaningful death? A better death? Or is something else going on? Is Lazarus called back from death into something the scriptures cryptically call eternal life...?

Eternal life. A concept that concerns not just the quantity of life but its quality.  
Eternal life. A concept that denotes a life lived in the company of God. Eternal life. A life that goes beyond what we think of as death. "I am the resurrection and I am life," says Jesus to Martha. And he's not just bragging. He's stating a fact. He is stating a spiritual fact.

"Take away the stone," he tells the villagers, and he means not just the boulder sealing the tomb, but the heaviness of the fear and guilt that entangles our experience of death.

"Come out!" he says to Lazarus and to us, as well. Get up! Rise up! Don't go yet! Don't go alone! I'll go with you! And to Lazarus' friends and mourners he says simply "unbind him and let him go." "I am the resurrection and I am life," says Jesus to Martha. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called death "thou greatest of feats on the journey to freedom." And maybe compared to his life in a Nazi prison it felt like that to him.

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I wouldn't go that far. There are parts of me that say with Dylan Thomas, "Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

But I hope and I pray that when my time of death comes, and it will, that my poet of choice might instead be Tennyson, who speaks of death as the easiness of slipping out of harbor across the sand bar into the sea.

He writes,

"Sunset and evening star,  
And one clear call for me!  
And may there be no moaning of the bar  
When I put out to sea.

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,  
Too full for sound and foam.  
When that which drew from the boundless deep  
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,  
And after that the dark!  
And may there be no sadness of farewell  
When I embark.

For, though from out our bourne of Time and Place  
The flood may bear me far,  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crosst the bar."