

The Other Lazarus

I woke up in complete darkness, with the sound of my name, Lazarus, ringing in my ears. What had happened? At that moment, the thought hit me.

I had died.

∞§∞

I'd always been a sickly kid. A bad birth caused all sorts of mischief with my health, one thing after another, until I lay on my deathbed at nineteen, with my sobbing mother lamenting my imminent departure from my troubled life. It didn't hurt all that much, but I could feel all my senses slowing down—the light dimming, the sounds fading—my body feeling as if it had begun to shut off.

Goodbye, Mother," I croaked weakly before I slumped into darkness and my breathing stopped.

That's why my waking up came as a complete mystery to me.

∞§∞

A constriction around my body and a smothering cloth over my face caused a moment of panic. I struggled until I loosened what seemed to be strips of cloth wrapped around me. Freeing my arm, I pulled the cloth from my face and sucked dank, smelly air into my oxygen-starved lungs. That's when a second revelation hit me.

I woke up in a tomb!

I could hear a hubbub outside and struggled to get out of my cloth prison and go see what could be causing it, only to run into something harder—the stone door of my tomb. Obviously, the architects of the tomb didn't design it for exit. The large stone slab, handled by several men with muscles and levers, might have had edges and crevices to ease handling from the outside, but the stone lay smooth and flat against the opening from the inside. Would I die for a second time, prisoner of the tomb in which they laid me? What could I do?

I began screaming at the top of my lungs.

∞§∞

"Joshua, do you hear that?"

"Hear what, David?"

"A muffled voice."

"Of course you hear voices. People are buzzing over The Rabbi raising Lazarus from the grave just now."

"I know that, but this is different. Listen."

"I don't hear anything."

David moved toward the sound and heard it louder there. "Over here! You can't miss it if you listen carefully."

∞§∞

The light coming through the entrance dazzled my eyes. When they focused, a group of astonished men stood before me. I must have made a shocking sight, standing with strips of cloth hanging from my otherwise bare body, evidence of my having been prepared for burial. I had no idea I looked even more shocking, since they could see strips of dead skin hanging from my arms.

"What happened?" I asked.

"What *happened*?" someone replied. "The Rabbi, Jeshua, just brought a man named Lazarus back from the dead!"

“It was me he called, then? My name’s Lazarus.”

“It is?” another asked. “How long have you been dead?”

“Never mind that,” another man said. “We saw our friend Lazarus exit the tomb with our own eyes. This is obviously a demon!”

“I have no idea how long I’ve been dead,” I replied, but I assure you, I’m no demon.”

When I saw them stoop to pick up stones, I ran from the cemetery as fast as I could.

∞§∞

I crouched by my home, my lack of clothes making me obvious to anyone seeing me. I peered in the window and I could see Mother moving around inside, cleaning. I wanted to run into the house and embrace her, but the shock of seeing me could cause a serious problem.

After a long time and with the sun lowering toward sunset, I decided to just go in and try to break the news to her as gently as possible, but I had no idea if it would work. I took a deep breath and entered the house.

As if we had arranged the meeting, she entered the room just as I walked in. She stood, transfixed, her eyes wide and her mouth hanging open. Before she could snap out of her paralysis, I ran to her and embraced her.

“I’m real, Mother, flesh and blood and not a ghost,” I said hastily.

“L-*Lazarus*?” she stammered. “Is it really you?”

“Yes, Mother, it’s really me. The Rabbi, Jeshua, has called me back by name.”

“He did? W-why are you naked?”

“I left the grave wrappings back in the tomb.”

She broke from my embrace and looked me up and down. “Why do you look like this? Are you now a leper?”

“No, I’m not a leper. I think my old skin has fallen off, now that I’m reborn.”

She reached out and lifted a strip of skin from my chest. It came away easily. “Ugh, you smell of the tomb. Let me bathe you.”

Mother always did think of practical things.

Standing like a little boy, I allowed my mother to remove the dead skin from me and wash me clean. Afterwards, she applied oil to my dry skin. It felt a little embarrassing, me being a man and all, but I knew she used that task to work out in her mind the acceptance of my return from the dead.

She gave me one of my own outfits—a tunic and short trousers—and as mothers will do, had me sit at table to partake of some bread, cheese and wine. That I did gratefully, since my stomach rumbled furiously at the sight of it.

“You say Rabbi Jeshua called you from the tomb?”

“Yes, I heard my name clearly.”

“Did he greet you at the entrance of the tomb?”

“No, I was trapped inside. Two men heard me yelling and rolled the stone away. They ended up thinking me a demon. I ran to avoid stoning.”

“Where was the Rabbi?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then how do you know it was Rabbi Jeshua?”

“I have no idea, but I just *knew* it was he who called me forth.”

My mother, bless her heart, contemplated my words and her face brightened. “Then we must go to him and you can present yourself.”

“Do you think it wise? Toward what end?”

“To let him know you’re alive.”

She got up, took my hand, drawing me to my feet and enveloping me in her embrace, crying softly on my shoulder.

∞§∞

“There he is!” Mother said, excitedly. “Let’s see if we can speak with him.”

I stood next to her with a hooded shawl over my head to prevent recognition. My walking around after having died would be hard to explain. She took me by the hand and led me through the throng milling around the Rabbi. He sat on the low wall of the town’s well, speaking to the crowd. A group of small children sat at his feet.

“Let the little children come to me and don’t stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I assure you, whoever does not welcome the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

We stood in awe at the Rabbi’s words, speaking about children in that way. With the boldness mothers often possess, Mother tugged me forward with her and dropped to her knees, urging me to kneel next to her, which I did.

“Rabbi,” she said, her head bowed. “Please forgive my impertinence, but I must thank you for giving my son back to me.”

I wondered what he would say to that, so I risked a peek. He smiled and studied us both. The crowd hushed around us. Finally, he lifted a child into his lap and spoke directly to me.

“Ah, the other Lazarus.”

“Yes, Rabbi, I answered your call.”

“Forgive me for interrupting, Rabbi,” my mother said. “Why did you not greet my son at the entrance of the tomb? He was almost stoned as a demon.”

“Because I didn’t call him specifically. Do you know Martha and her sister, Mary?”

“Yes, Rabbi.”

“My words were for their brother, also called Lazarus.”

“Is that what you meant when you called me the *other* Lazarus?” I asked.

He nodded, placed his hand on the head of the child on his lap and she looked up at him.

“Do you believe as this child?”

“In what? The Kingdom of God?”

He nodded again, smiling down on the little girl and returning his gaze to me. “I have come from my father to speak to Israel about his kingdom. Do you welcome that kingdom?”

“I do, Rabbi.”

“Then, *believe*.”

I didn’t have to ask in what, or whom, to believe, but I *knew* he had just told me to believe in him.

“I believe, Rabbi. Thank you for giving me life again.”

“Did you know your words would also raise my son?” Mother, bold as ever, asked. “Were there any others besides him?”

“He who hears my words and believes my Father has sent me will be saved. Do you believe as does your son?”

All at once, Mother seemed to deflate as if she realized her impertinence. She fell forward and grasped his dusty feet, kissing them. “Yes, I believe. Thank you for giving me back my son.”

Jeshua rose and spoke once more to the crowd. “These two have come to me as these little children. Welcome the Kingdom of God as they have done and know that the Father and I are

one. Believe this and you will see Paradise.” He looked down at us. “Rise and tell others what has happened to you.”

We got to our feet and staggered off. When Mother had brought me to see Rabbi Jeshua, I had no idea what would happen. The crowd swirled around us, but we walked through them as if deaf and dumb. Confused over what had happened to me, we went to him for answers and found something we never expected. We found salvation.

∞§∞

Months later, Mother and I stood weeping as we looked upon Rabbi Jeshua, hanging on a Roman cross like a common criminal. We had just heard him say, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they have done,” and, later, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

As the sky unnaturally darkened and the Earth shook, we trembled, confused at the turn of events. Why had they killed the Rabbi, a man who did nothing but good things, like healing the sick and raising the dead? My own renewed life stood as testament to that.

In the darkness of that terrible day, Mother fell against me and cried out her sorrow. Rabbi Jeshua had returned her son to her and had now died on a cruel cross, victim of the harsh hand of the Romans, egged on by the cynical Pharisees. Though it shook my faith to its roots, I nevertheless knew in my heart that, as he had called me forth from the tomb, he would himself rise from the grave as I had done.

After all, would that not be possible for Jeshua, who said that he and God were one and the same? I didn’t know exactly how that could be, but my faith remained firm.

My status as the *other* Lazarus confirmed the truth of his words.