

One of my favorite Bible-like books gave me a certain amount of irreverent inspiration for this morning, so I've decided to share it with you...appropriately edited. The book is called *Lamb: The Gospel according to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal*. In it the raising of Simon Lazarus is an event shared by "Joshua," Martha, Thomas the Twin, Matthew and Joseph of Arimathea and is narrated by Biff himself. It goes like this:

When we got to Bethany, Martha was waiting for us in the street in front of Simon's house. She went right to Joshua and he held out his arms to embrace her, but when she got to him she pushed him away.

"My brother is dead," she said. "Where were you?"

"I came as soon as I heard. . . . Where is he?" Joshua asked, his voice booming over the sobs and protests.

"He bought a tomb in Kidron," said Martha.

"Take me there, I need to wake my friend."

"Dead," said Thomas. "Dead, dead, dead."

There was a sparkle of hope amid the tears in Martha's eyes. "Wake him?"

"Dead as a doornail. Dead as Moses. Mmmph. . ." Matthew clamped his hand over Thomas's mouth.

"You believe that Simon will rise from the dead, don't you?" asked Joshua.

“In the end, when the kingdom comes, and everyone is raised, yes, I believe,” said Martha.

“Do you believe I am who I say I am.”

“Of course.”

“Then show me where my friend lies sleeping.”

Thomas and Matthew helped Martha walk along while I walked with Joshua.

“Four days dead, Josh. Four days. Divine Spark or not, the flesh is empty.”

“Simon will walk again if he is but bone,” said Joshua.

“Okey-dokey. But this has never been one of your better miracles.”

When we got to the tomb there was a tall, thin, aristocratic man sitting outside eating a fig. “I thought you would come here,” he said. “Rabbi, I’m Joseph of Arimathea. How may I serve.”

“Stand up Joseph. Help roll away this stone.”

Joshua put his arms around Maggie and Martha while the rest of us wrestled with the stone. As soon as the seal was broken I was hit with a stench that gagged me and Thomas actually lost his supper in the dirt.

“He stinks,” said Matthew.

“I thought he would smell more like a cat,” said Thomas. (Thomas had confused ‘leper’ with ‘leopard’.)

Joshua held his arms out as if waiting to embrace his friend.
“Come out, Simon Lazarus, come out into the light.”
Nothing but stench came out of the tomb.

“Come forth, Simon. Come out of that tomb,” Joshua commanded.

And absolutely nothing happened.

“Simon, DARN IT, come out of there.”

And ever so weakly, there came a voice from inside the tomb. “No.”

“What do you mean, ‘no’? You have risen from the dead, now come forth. Show these unbelievers that you have risen.”

“I believe,” I said.

“Convinced me,” said Matthew.

“Simon, get your leprous butt out here,” Joshua commanded.

“But I’m . . . I’m all icky.”

Finally, Joshua lowered his arms and stormed into the tomb.
“I can’t believe that you bring a guy back from the dead and he doesn’t even have the courtesy to come out – WHOA! HOLY MOLY!” Joshua came backing out of the tomb, stiff-legged. Very calmly and quietly, he said, “We need clean clothes, and some water to wash with and bandages, lots of bandages. I can heal him, but we have to sort of get all of his parts stuck back together first.”

I resorted to comedy as an introduction because I would much rather be funny than think about the inevitability of my own demise. Death eventually finds us all, as Steve and I have experienced too many times over the last 11 months. Lazarus is still going to have to die another day. On that day, Jesus will not be calling him forth and demanding the funeral linens be removed. On that day, Lazarus will begin his journey toward dry bones.

Lazarus' fate is my fate as well. I can live better through chemistry and by making good choices, but I can't escape the fact that I will die. Something's gonna get me – whether it's my lousy gene pool or the inattentive and simultaneous driving and texting of the person in the car ahead of me and behind me and beside me.

Because I believe what I preach, I know that at that point my life will change, not end. This leads me back to the scriptures and to the realization that dry bones, and the stench of a new made grave, have something to say about how our own response to the command of God.

When I envision a valley of dry bones I see community disconnected. Nothing is holding the bones together. There are no sinews of compassion to knit together the skeleton. The life's blood of communication has been poured out on the ground. The bones over which Ezekiel prophesied were bones of slain warriors. Their disconnectedness was not of their own choosing.

The dry bones of our personal disconnectedness usually come from our choices, even if those choices are the correct ones. Dry bones are those times after friends or family move away, or worse. Dry bones are when friendships or other relationships have come to an end. Dry bones times are when prayers feel unanswered, or worse – unheard. Dry bone times are brittle, fragile, cut off completely, hopeless.

But, there are worse things. There are new graves.

Newly made graves stink. At least, they did in Lazarus' day. No fancy embalming, no posthumous cosmetics, no hermetically sealed caskets dropped into concrete vaults.

In Lazarus' day the women washed his body and wrapped it in linen. They added some myrrh to keep the smell from encroaching during the burial rites. And then it was off to the tomb to let worms and enzymes do their work of reducing former vitality to bones and dust while those left behind are reduced to weeping and wailing.

It makes me wonder. What festers in our souls? What rots under the linens that keep us bound? What myrrh are we applying to hide the stench?

Instead of community disconnected, in the newly made grave I see the disconnection we create within ourselves and between ourselves and God. Within us there is forgiveness unoffered and forgiveness unaccepted. Within us there is the denial of the image of the God who made us. We foster hurts suffered and fail to acknowledge hurts we have authored. Allowed to fester, these hurts and denials and lack of forgiveness munch away at our souls and at our self-esteem to the point that we forget who and whose we are.

To reconnect body and soul, to reconnect ourselves to community, we need God and God needs us.

God needs us to prophesy and call to life and wholeness those who find themselves scattered in valleys not of their choosing. God needs our voice to say to the broken peoples of the world “God’s spirit is within you – live!” God needs us to minister to those who are emerging from their loamy places, bringing fresh water to loose any bindings that may cling to their wounds. But, most of all, we need to respond to God’s call. God knows our unruly wills and affections and wants to heal them. Jesus doesn’t want to hear “no, thanks, I’m icky” from the depths of our despair. Jesus already knows we’re icky, so there’s no sense in trying to hide.

So come out. Come out of the tomb you need not inhabit yet. Come out into the light and let the joy of Christ’s love heal you and set you free. Jesus can put all your broken parts together again, even the most icky ones. Come and see.

Amen.

*Much Grass: Christopher Moore and *Lamb*.