Resurrection Road
Loose That Man and Let Him Go!

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

Resurrection Road: Loose That Man and Let Him Go!
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Background Notes
Key Scripture Texts: John 11:41-46

The Texts
John 11:41-46  41 So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me.  42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."  43 When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"  44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."  45 Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.  46 But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

Introduction
We couldn’t ask for better drama. Everybody watches the tomb after Jesus commands the removal of its stone. Debate about removing the stone follows. Jesus challenges the mourners to believe him so that they might see the glory of God. Pause. Suspense.

Did anybody but Jesus know what to expect when the stone was taken away? What sort of language can make sense out of what was about to happen? As we noted early in our series, few people actually thought that dead people could or should rise from their graves. With the exception of a few texts from the Old Testament, supported by certain sects of Judaism, people only thought about life in an unknown realm where human beings continued to exist as disembodied souls in a place called Sheol in the Hebrew and Hades in the Greek. Ask a non-Jew about life after death and they would tell you it’s a mixed bag where a few famous people have their stories told by the Greek poets. Or, the dead appear as apparitions with tales of fortune or woe for the living. Burying the dead was important for both Jews and Greeks. Denying burial to a Greek doomed him to a restless wandering among living as a spirit. Recall the tragedy by Sophocles, Antigone, were King Creon denies burial to Polynices for crimes against the state (and against his brother, Eteocles).

Few saw death in positive terms. Death was the grave or the shades, and death had power over everybody. Breaking the power of death meant changing the order of the world, and few ventured belief in such a fantastic development. Hope, classically understood, was a false expectation about the future. Even the famous philosophers Socrates and Plato regarded the body as the prison of the soul, and release from the prison was the true freedom. The idea that anybody would return to the body seemed ridiculous on those grounds.

So as we reach the last installment in our series, a certain implausibility sits in front of us. What happens when the stone is taken away? Is this event a mere singularity or does it foreshadow a radically altered future? If dead men don’t rise, what, for goodness’ sake, happened to Lazarus that day?

As before, the story is told in stages, giving the audience plenty of time to ponder each turn of events, wondering aloud about the significance of each gesture and word of Jesus. But then, when the reader imagines that the climax has arrived, she is dragged off to darkened rooms back in Jerusalem where the power brokers of Second Temple Judaism plot the downfall of Jesus. Far from defusing the animosity toward Jesus, the raising of Lazarus puts both Jesus and his friend in grave danger. What exacting price comes with such a miracle of new life? Is the ending bittersweet, after all?
Yet, central to this week’s Gospel reading are the closing words of 11:44 that promise freedom beyond “life after life after death.” We will explore the importance of Jesus’ final words to the mourners and its relevance to our own lives, as Jesus commands the mourners, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

Obedience
Does not 11:41 witness to simple obedience? “So they took away the stone.” The Greek of this text begins with the word οὖν, a conjunction that commonly resumes a narrative and also states the result or conclusion of the previous material. In this case, those who heard Jesus’ command to roll away the stone had argued with him about the practicality of doing so, leading to Martha’s famous exclamation that the body would produce a bad odor. She was met with Jesus’ promise to show her and the others the glory of God. In response to Jesus’ words, they roll away the stone. The meaning of οὖν in this context is: “so, then, or therefore” — the outcome or result of what Jesus said to the mourners. All Jesus needed to do was tell his audience that they would see the glory of God if they removed the stone, and they quickly obeyed him. Did they know what this glory would look like? Probably not, and yet they could not resist finding out! People do not always respond to Jesus with entirely pure motives at first. After all, we are by nature creatures of self-interest and curiosity, and such factors no doubt pushed the audience to open up the tomb to see what would happen. Enemies of Jesus might have imagined this could be the end of the road for Jesus if nothing happened, and they were willing to take that gamble. Friends of Jesus who trusted him might have hoped that this was the Resurrection Road for Lazarus and the glory of God for Jesus. For others, rolling away the stone was much like rolling the dice: they didn’t know what would happen. “So they took away the stone…”

Obedience isn’t always complicated and difficult. Yet, simple obedience can be demanding on our faith. Jesus would ask of others what they needed to do, and he would not do for them what a genuine act of faith required. Such obedience is not works righteousness that tries to prove itself to God or others, but instead is, what another biblical text calls, “the obedience of faith” (Romans 1:5). Rolling away the stone gave visibility to faith. In addition, that simple act of obedience acknowledged something: that the mourners had put the stone over the tomb in the first place, and so they needed to take the stone away. Lazarus didn’t belong in a tomb; the tomb was not his home; the tomb held no future for him. By asking others to roll away the stone, Jesus was in effect saying, “This is no place for Lazarus, and this is no place for you. I have better things in mind for all of you than monuments to death.”

Opening the tomb was paramount to opening the heart, and Jesus faithfully receives this act of obedience as the receptivity of the mourners’ faith.

Prayer
Again, the writer uses another conjunction, de, to introduce the next event in the series. This word usually marks a contrast in the text. In this case the idea seems to be this: The mourners rolled away the stone, but Jesus prayed. In other words, the mourners did what they could do, but Jesus did what only he could do. They rolled; he prayed! The content of this prayer is rich and profound, and the key elements are noteworthy.

1. He looked up and said. Postures of prayer communicate attitudes of the heart, and the Bible includes many of them: standing, kneeling, falling on one’s face, lifting up hands, and, as in this case, lifting up the eyes to heaven. Here is a prayer of expectation that looks into heaven where God awaits the request of His Son. We are reminded of Psalm 121:1 and 123:1. When Isaiah receives the Word to “lift your eyes and look to the heavens” (40:26), God reminds him who made all the heavenly bodies and who moves them in their courses by His might and power. Later, in 51:6, when he lifts his eyes to heaven and then lowers them to earth, God tells him that the old world will pass away but God’s righteousness will last forever. This dual experience confirms God’s rule over all his creation. Looking into heaven, Jesus witnesses to the power and righteousness of God to do a mighty work for all to see.

Jesus does not look into the tomb where Lazarus lies dead and decaying. In the tomb, the dead buried their dead (Matthew 8:22; Luke 9:60), and Jesus refuses to keep company with the dead who do not rise. Instead,
Jesus looks up into heaven where life everlasting fills eternity with the glory of God. To look up is to look beyond the limitations of the tomb and to gaze into the eyes of the God who gives life.

2. **He calls God “Father.”** Intimacy saturates this prayer, much as it will saturate the prayer of John 17 on a later occasion. The one who raises the dead is not the generic God of “providence” who runs the world “at a distance” as if by remote control. Jesus looks and speaks to the God he knows, and he knows Him as Father. In the Gospel of John, Jesus calls God “Father” some 112 times. Jesus began the prayer he taught his disciples with “Our Father” (Matthew 6:9; Luke 11:2). The Jews certainly knew God as Father from their Old Testament readings where Yahweh calls Israel “my son” (Exodus 4:22-23; Hosea 11:1; Malachi 1:6; 3:17). By calling God “Father,” the Bible emphasizes that He is the giver of life, and so when Jesus addresses God as Father He acknowledges the gift of life available to Lazarus. Raising Lazarus reaffirms that God is his Father, the author of his very life, and the giver of a new kind of life.

3. **He thanks the Father for hearing him.** Speaking in the present tense, Jesus says “I am thanking you, Father…” and thereby grounds his prayer in gratitude. He does not demand or invoke the privileges of his sonship or command God to act. Those are not the petitions of a son to his father. Sons honor their fathers when they ask for things, and Jesus models such behavior for those eavesdropping on his words. The Old Testament couples thanksgiving with trust in the enduring love of God for His people: “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. His love endures forever” (Psalm 136:1-3, 26). Rendering thanks is also a form of witness to the works of God: “And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted” (Isaiah 12:4; also, Psalm 107:8, 15, 21, 31). In this case, Jesus offers thanksgiving for the Father’s hearing of him. The writer uses the aorist tense with the verb “to hear, give heed, give a judicial hearing” (akouō). For God to “hear” doesn’t just mean He’s paying attention, but in this case it refers to the Father’s willingness to respond to Jesus’ request by doing something for him. The aorist tense can mean a decisive event in the past, and also a periodic event in the past (iterative aorist). The Father’s hearing of Jesus is a reliable experience of answered prayers, and Jesus begins with gratitude for this past record of the Father’s faithful dealing with him.

4. **He affirms his confidence in the Father’s reliable hearing of his prayers.** Further, Jesus says in 11:42 that the Father’s hearing of him has always been the case, whether anybody else ever knew about it or not. To express this, Jesus uses a combination of tenses: “I knew,” the pluperfect form of oída (“to know”), indicating that Jesus has had a long-standing acquaintance with the Father’s ways; “you always hear,” the present tense, marking continuous action. Combining the thoughts of 11:41 and 11:42, Jesus declares the utter reliability of the Father in answering his prayers, even as he now stands in front of the open tomb of a man who has been dead for four days! How important it must have been for Jesus to arrive at this moment of supreme significance with the full knowledge that his Father was the Yahweh of Israel — He who is, was, and is to come. What Lazarus needs is a direct encounter with the God who is the giver of life and who will do so without reservation at the request of Jesus. Jesus needs to know — and he does — that such a God is present in the little town of Bethany, ready to make His glory known in answer to Jesus’ prayers for Lazarus.

5. **He clarifies the purpose of his prayer: for the benefit of others.** Jesus prayed audibly, the text implies, so that those who hear what Jesus says to the Father might respond in saving faith. This is, says Jesus, “for the benefit of the people standing here.” There is nothing self-serving about this prayer of Jesus, for he seeks the faith of others — literally, “for the sake of the crowd standing around here.” By using the Greek word ochlos (“crowd”), the text underscores the large of number of people who would witness the raising of Lazarus. The crowd hears the prayer of Jesus, they will hear the command of Jesus, and they will see Lazarus leave the tomb alive. Nothing is “done in a corner” in Bethany on that day. Later, in 18:20, he would tell his accusers, “I have spoken openly to the world.” The public nature of Lazarus’ resurrection was a courageous act on the part of Jesus, since shortly afterwards the miracle would provoke a chain of events leading to his arrest.

6. **He focuses that benefit on the faith of the audience.** Faith means more than intellectual assent to a body of ideas. Faith is ultimate concern and trust in God. Jesus, by his gracious work for Lazarus, seeks to engender that kind of faith in those who witness the event. Such faith is deeply personal and accessible.
God appears as the Father who gives life to His children through the raising of Lazarus, and so makes Himself available for any in the crowd who desire that same sort of life. As he told Martha in a previous conversation, “He who lives and believes in me shall never die” (11:26). The crowd lives: will the crowd believe? Will Martha believe? Will Mary believe? That is the presenting question evoked by Jesus’ prayer.

7. **He locates that faith in the Father’s sending of Jesus.** The idea that the Father “sent” Jesus, His Son, is a major theme in John’s Gospel. Jesus is the one sent (see 5:23, 36-37, 6:44, 57; 8:16, 18, 42; 10:36; 12:49; 14:24; 17:21, 25; 20:21). Jesus comes from the Father as His royal representative who shows the world what the Father is like by doing the works that the Father does. Jesus is more than a messenger of God; he is God’s own Son who fully represents God in word and in deed. “See me. See my Father” (John 14:9). Nothing reinforced that fact more than for a crowd of people to see Jesus bring a dead man back to life!

**Command**

Prayer prepares the crowd for what is about to happen. Jesus wants the crowd to see the essential connection between prayer and present faith. In Second Temple Judaism there were many different kinds of prayers, most of them adapted from the Hebrew Psalm-book. Often, the congregants at synagogue would pray, “Blessed are you, O Lord, our God, King of the universe,” followed by the reciting of some great deed God has done for His people. *Adonai*, the name Israel used to represent God’s unspoken name (*Yahweh*), personalized the address of prayer. Then, the prayer would rehearse what God has done already for His people, especially how He rescued Israel from the land of Egypt. When the Hebrew Bible spoke about the works of God, it used the words of God to announce them. Creation (Genesis 1) is a constant exchange between what God said and what God did. “And God said, let there be… and there was …” Command precedes deed; word comes before action. Jesus uses the same pattern in John 11:43 where he speaks the word of life, and then all who hear him witness the results.

“Lazarus, come out!” is the command of Jesus the Creator God who life flows from the Father and into the world. For Jesus to utter the words “come out” is paramount to God saying, “Let there be light…” Lazarus no doubt experienced the command as one coming from darkness into the light. Earlier in John’s Gospel Jesus foreshadowed this moment:

> 28 “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice 29 and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned (John 5:28-29).

Notice the similarity of language: “hear his voice and come out.” Such a voice had called for humankind since the moment of creation. Such a voice echoed in the garden when the first human pair hid themselves. The voice of God calls into existence what did not exist before (see Romans 4:17). The command of Jesus to Lazarus thundered in the tomb as “words of life” where there had once been only death. This had been the experience of ancient Israel in Egypt when God called His “son” out of Egypt (Hosea 11:1). “The words I speak to you,” Jesus once told the crowds, “are spirit and life” (John 6:63), especially when “the flesh” can no longer “profit.” Lazarus’ flesh was dead and decaying and without profit. But the words of Jesus — the command of Jesus — restores life. “Can these bones live again?” God asked the prophet Ezekiel. Unable to reply, the man of God replied, “Lord, you know!” The bones Ezekiel saw were well beyond human rescue, for they were “very dry” (Ezekiel 37:2-3)! Lazarus was well beyond human rescue, and only the “word from the mouth of God” could bring him to life.

The words of Jesus are powerful words. As Leon Morris points out, “Wizards muttered their incantations and spells (cf. Isa. 8:19). Not so the Son of God.” They were loud, not for Lazarus’ sake, but for the benefit of those who witnessed the miracle and saw the power of God and not some cheap magic trick.

Without hesitation, the text responds to the words of Jesus with: “The dead man came out” (11:44). The Greek of this passage uses the word *tethnēkōs*, an expression formed from the verb *thnēskō*, “to die, be dead.” It is a perfect active participle that functions like a noun: “The one who has been dead,” such that he is still dead, or at
least ought to be dead! Crudely, we might just call him “the dead guy”! The dead guy does what dead guys aren’t supposed to do: come out of the tomb. The casual nature of John’s language is stunning, much like the direct words of Genesis 1 where God speaks and the world bursts into existence. Yet there is nothing casual about what happened — at least not for those standing around. What they have just witnessed is a new creation coming alive before their very eyes. How do you describe such a thing? What language is adequate to communicate it? The writer of our text is wise, for he avoids extravagant phrases or flowery expressions and sticks to the facts.

As would be expected, Lazarus hobbles from the tomb still bound by his grave clothes. He is alive, that is for certain, but he carries on his body the solemn reminder of his past. Anybody who looks at him knows that Lazarus has been dead by the clothes that he wears. Those clothes are a true extension of his body that is mortal and susceptible to death. Paul once wrote that we “carry about the dying of the Lord Jesus” (2 Corinthians 4:10) — his way of saying that though we are born again, yet our earthly form still carries with it our connection to the old world. Grave clothes function in our text in both literal and symbolic ways.

In describing Lazarus’ condition, the writer refers to keiriais, narrows strips wound round the body. Also, there was the spoudarios, from the Latin sudarium, a separate cloth for the head and face. A fuller depiction comes from Sanders:

The corpse would have been placed on a strip of linen, wide and long enough to envelop it completely. The feet would be placed at one end, and the cloth would then be drawn over the head to the feet, the feet would be bound at the ankles, and the arms secured to the body with linen bandages, and the face bound round with another cloth to keep the jaw in place ... So bound up, a man could not possibly walk. Hence Jesus’ final command, when Lazarus struggled out of the tomb. But he could at least have shuffled to the entrance, and it is absurd to imagine that a subsidiary miracle was necessary to waft him from the tomb.1

Readers familiar with burial practices in Israel would hardly miss the difficulty posed by Lazarus’ grave clothes, and that is why the writer engenders the image of a bound man trying to leave his tomb. Though alive, he struggles yet with the remnants of the past, the marks of death, and the reminders of his mortality. Scholars see a theological meaning here, namely, that those who undergo conversion still grapple with the afflictions of their former way of life. They, too, are bound from head to toe by the effects of sin that clings to their soul like grave clothes, thereby restricting their walk with the Lord. But this condition need only be temporary. Grace is available for those so bound, and they hear the liberating words of Jesus: “Take off the grave clothes and let him go!”

Curiously, the text instructs others to unfetter Lazarus. He cannot untie himself. Could it be that the writer wants us to hear a further message from the experience of Lazarus? Just as others rolled the stone over the tomb, so also others bound the dead man at his burial. To what extent do others — do we — keep our neighbors wrapped in their grave clothes and imprisoned in their tombs? Is it not possible that we keep them there through prejudice and ignorance? Might we not say of them, “Can such persons really change, after all?” Or worse, “Perhaps they are not among the chosen.” It is with such shrouds that we may well keep others in their tombs and deprived of the freedom that Jesus’ life offers them. What sorts of communities do we foster in our churches? Are there certain kinds of people that will not find welcome there? Is it possible that the scent of death hangs so heavily on them that we cannot imagine them ever set free? (see John 8:32-36; Romans 6:18-22; 8:1-2; Galatians 5:1, 13).

We can almost hear Jesus in frustration saying to the stunned mourners, “What are you waiting for, set Lazarus free!” And so Jesus speaks to us about all of those who remain imprisoned in tombs and bound by shrouds.

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Nothing in the text describes the unbinding, though we assume somebody obeyed Jesus that day and set Lazarus free. It’s hard to imagine otherwise. Still, how must the audience have trembled before such power of life that emerged with Lazarus from the tomb! Others were no doubt put off by the laws of uncleanness that warned the living about contact with the dead (for example, Numbers 19:11). Everything a corpse touched was unclean. So what about a corpse that lives again? Are its clothes unclean? Such questions seem trivial in light of what transpired that day in Bethany. Who cares about such purity laws when life and hope shines all around in the wake of Jesus’ miracle? How could anyone split hairs about Torah holiness rules after seeing life come out of death through the words of Jesus — living words of the spirit and not dead words of the letter (see 2 Corinthians 3:3, 6)? How could we? Do we?

**Aftermath**

What follows in 11:45-46 reveals the mixed nature of Jesus’ audience. We have been kept wondering about the loyalties of those whom came down from Jerusalem to console Mary and Martha. Are they friend or foe? It turns out that they are *both*. Those whose hearts were open to the fresh work of God in the world find in Jesus a genuine source of faith, and “put their faith in him.” Again, faith fastens itself, not to ideas but to the person of Jesus. For them, the intentional actions of Jesus are welcome. Faith is an *openness* to Jesus, a willingness to *receive* him (John 1:12), and a commitment to *follow* him. Few, if any, of the witnesses to the great wonder at Bethany had prior understanding of what Jesus planned to do. What they saw broke the mold of their assumptions about what was possible. Those who put their trust in Jesus *allowed* him to make his entrance into their lives and did not throw up artificial barriers to the miracle he performed.

Not everyone approached Jesus in this way, as 11:46 reveals. *Some*, the text tells us, “went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.” The Greek says, “… they went away” (*aperchomai*), presumably to fulfill their original mission as spies for the ruling authorities in Jerusalem. And so they went away in a different sense, for they *chose* to go away from Jesus, not having allowed the wonder of the resurrection miracle to wash over their hearts and awaken trust in him. They exhibited true *prejudice*, absent the openness that attracted faith in 11:45.

Jesus had always been a source of division in his audience (see Matthew 10:34-39). Much like the choice offered by Joshua in the Old Testament, those who encountered Jesus heard the words, “Choose you this day whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:15), but with the additional encouragement of Moses in Deuteronomy 30:19, “Choose life!” It should have been easy for all of them to choose life as a result of the life that Lazarus discovered in such a personal and public way. Yet those who determined not “to have this man rule over” them (Luke 19:14), refused to believe, and with that decision rested an even more fatal outcome, namely, that their “would not” resulted in their “could not” (John 12:37-39).

**Foreshadowings**

Nothing less than alarm stirred among the rulers of Israel after the events in Bethany. What follows in John’s Gospel (11:47-54) is an official decision to put Jesus to death, and that threat is repeated in 12:10-11 where Lazarus is added to the agenda! Imagine that! The man Jesus raised from the dead is targeted for execution also. Thus, irony saturates the narrative: the one who raised Lazarus from the dead now faces his own death. Resurrection Road moves onward beyond Bethany, and journeys through the shadow of the cross where Jesus will soon die: Life in the shadow of death; death in the shadow of life. Led by the High Priest and the powerful priestly families along with the Pharisee-scribes, the Sanhedrin convened to preserve their control over Jewish life. How Rome would respond to these recent events troubled them most. Why? Because the Empire relied on the power of intimidation to maintain itself, and the highest form of intimidation was capital execution. But Jesus had changed that locus of power by raising up Lazarus. If Jesus and his movement could raise the dead, then the Empire could not use the fear of death to keep people in line. What the Jerusalem leadership feared was loss of control, not loss of city or Temple. The key phrase here is “take away *from us*” (11:48). A highly tenuous bond linked Jerusalem and Rome, since the High Priest and his peers ruled by Roman consent and could not even put on their vestments without permission from the procurator, Pilate.
Jesus the giver of life posed a genuine threat to the urban elite who vent frustration in 11:45-54 and also in 12:19 where the Pharisees exclaim, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!” Then the high priest Caiaphas counsels his colleagues with tinges of sarcasm and arrogance that Jesus was only one man, and that his death was worth it to save the whole nation (11:50). As Bultmann once wrote, “Political sagacity requires that the lesser evil be preferred to the greater, and it demands that the fundamental principle be put into effect that the individual be sacrificed in the interest of the nation.”

Even the Jewish traditional writings tend to support the offer of “one for many” in the face of danger to life and limb. John offers a different interpretation — one that not even Caiaphas himself discerned and that spoke with the power of prophecy. The heart of the Gospel is that Jesus died for the whole world, so that the whole world might not perish but have eternal life (3:16). An important insight comes from this statement: Jesus will continue the work of the Resurrection Road, not by standing before another tomb and calling forth another Lazarus, but by going to the cross where he dies and then rises again. The story of Lazarus does not end at 11:44 but continues until the end of John’s Gospel where everyone becomes Lazarus and everyone must pass through death to life through the sacrifice of Jesus.

To summarize this future work of Jesus, the writer tells us about the Caiaphas prophecy (11:51-52):

He prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.

There are, then, many tombs and many folks like Lazarus, scattered throughout the world. Jesus’ goal is to “bring them together and make them one.” Lazarus is not alone, and the journey down Resurrection Road has not ended with him.

Conclusion
The present series on John 11 is about God’s love for the world and His commitment to raise the world to new life through the agency of Jesus, His Son. He does not discharge that ministry without us. He chooses to spend time with his disciples (11:53) — with us. The story of Lazarus reveals that Jesus takes human suffering and grief seriously and does not hastily brush aside the tears of Martha or Mary or the other mourners in Bethany. His own tears at the tomb reveal the deeply human dimension of Jesus. Yet, tears do not deter Jesus from his heaven-sent calling to bring life to the world wherever he finds death.

At Jesus’ command, stones move, dead men rise, and fetters are stripped from those bound by the past. “In him was life,” the editor of John 1 tells us, “and the life was the light of men” (1:4-5). Ordinarily light precedes life in the natural order of things where vegetation grows through the sun’s energy. In Jesus’ case, his word of life becomes light in the darkness, as the natural order is reversed by the Son of God. Without the word of life from Jesus, Lazarus would stay in the tomb, captive to his grave clothes until some distant “last day” when, it was thought, the dead are raised — somehow. The personal arrival of Jesus at Bethany changed all of that, and the idea that human beings, here and now, can receive God’s own life ceases to be a tenant of faith and becomes, instead, a reality of life.

Jesus does not choose to act alone in his work of raising the dead. He needs followers who will share with him in his grief for the world, and also in his anger at the damage death has done to the world. He needs followers who will roll away the stone when he commands them to do so. He needs followers to watch him cry and watch him pray. He needs followers who will unbind those whom he has given new life and set them free. Jesus needs you and me. He needs his church revitalized and equipped for mission: a community of praying, reading, studying, worshipping, serving, and reaching followers in search of others whom Jesus loves.

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3 Beasley-Murray, 196-197.
During these five weeks, we have allowed the narrator of John 11 to tell us the story of Jesus in slow and careful scenes. At no time did Jesus ever appear to be in a hurry, for his actions were deliberate and each of them significant. He wanted those who watched him to witness what he did and how he did it. He understood how people grieved and did not rush them, though he gently nudged them toward hope. Personal relationship with Jesus was more important than brittle lines of doctrinal truth. “Believe in me,” Jesus consistently urged his audience. But faith in Jesus was not groundless, for those who watched Jesus that day saw him do what no other had ever done. So powerful was the effect on the crowd at Bethany that they joined the vanguard of those who hailed his entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (12:17). Where will the mighty works of Jesus send us? What procession will we join? Having met Jesus firsthand, we have no option to opt out of mission to the world. Like the crowds in 12:17, we too must “spread the word.” Face it, dead men rising are a whole lot more motivating than dead men walking. And that’s a word worth spreading.

Each of us has been raised and loosed so that we might see others raised and loosed also. We are called to freedom and to holiness by the Good News of Jesus. His opening words at the synagogue in Nazareth proclaimed his mission, fresh from the pages of Isaiah 61:

18 “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” 20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, 21 and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:18-21).

Here is the inaugural address that scattered the rays of light until they arrived at Bethany where freedom and God’s favor changed the life of one man. That message shapes the direction of our ministry as Christians and as the church. “Today” is a word for us also. “Today” can be fulfilled for the generation who hears and sees and receives the word of life from our lips. He says to us, as he did to them, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” (11:25-26a). He asks us, as he asked Martha, “Do you believe this?” And he asks us to ask others also.

Glory to God! Amen.
Digger Deeper: Resurrection Road: Loose That Man and Let Him Go!
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of Resurrection Road: Loose That Man and Let Him Go! carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website at http://www.chicagofirstnaz.org, click on Resources, click the tab Series, find and click on the series title, find and click on the date you want, and then click on the Background Notes link at the lower left. You can also pick up a copy of the Background Notes at the Information desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. Take a few moments this week to review the whole passage on which our series has been based (John 11:1-46). Make notes of ideas you might have missed in previous readings.
2. Our attention this week is on 11:41-46. As you prayerfully read this closing text, identify the actions of Jesus that lead up to the climax. Comment on the importance of each one. What thoughts might have gone through your mind as you listened and watched Jesus?
3. How did the mourners obey Jesus in 11:41? Compare the preceding verses for the context of this obedience. What personal beliefs, prejudices, and repulsions did they need to overcome in doing so? What might the onlookers have expected once the stone was rolled away?
4. Re-read the prayer Jesus offers in 11:41-42. What posture does Jesus assume? Explain the significance of this (see also, Psalm 121:1; 123:1; Isaiah 40:26; 51:6). Identify the main statements found in the prayer, and comment briefly on each one.
5. What questions does the prayer raise in your mind? Why does Jesus offer this prayer? How might you have responded after hearing Jesus pray these words?
6. How does Jesus address God? (see also John 17; Mathew 6:9; Luke 11:2; Exodus 4:22-23; Hosea 11:1; Malachi 1:6; 3:17). What aspect of God’s character does Jesus emphasize when he refers to God in this way?
7. What role does thanksgiving have in this prayer? (Compare with Psalm 136:1-3, 26; Isaiah 12:4; Psalm 107:8, 15, 21, and 31). For what does Jesus thank God? How does this thanksgiving affect Jesus’ confidence in God, given the circumstances of Lazarus?
8. In what sense is the prayer “self-less”? How does the prayer look outward and not inward? Why is that an important emphasis in light of what Jesus is about to do?
9. Why does Jesus stress the fact that God has “sent” him? Discuss this in light of Jesus’ mission (or vocation). (Compare also John 5:23, 36-37, 6:44, 57; 8:16, 18, 42; 10:36; 12:49; 14:24; 17:21, 25; 20:21). How will the raising of Lazarus underscore the mission of Jesus?
10. Describe the way Jesus raises Lazarus. Compare with John 5:28-29; Romans 4:17; Hosea 11:1; John 6:63; Ezekiel 37:2-3. What sorts of words are these that Jesus speaks from outside the tomb?
11. How does Lazarus come out of the tomb? Describe his condition and the problem this creates for him and for the mourners. What instructions did Jesus give to the crowd in 11:44? How might an observant Jew have reacted to what Jesus asked? (see Numbers 19:11). How could the crowd overcome its reluctance to obey Jesus in this case?
12. Lazarus was “bound” when he left the tomb? In what ways are human beings bound even after Jesus raises them to new life in him? What provision has God made for our release? In what ways might we look at other people as bound and beyond help? How can we overcome such prejudices? (see John 8:32-36; Romans 6:18-22; 8:1-2; Galatians 5:1, 13).
13. The aftermath of this series comes in 11:45-54. What consequence does the raising of Lazarus trigger among the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem? How do they plan to respond? Why? Discuss the logic of their reasoning, and then explain the recommendation of Caiaphas?
14. On the positive side, what good things came from the Resurrection Road experience of John 11? Refer to John 12:17 as you consider your answer.
15. What lessons do you take away from this series? How does studying John 11 affect the way you now look at your mission to the world around you? Who are the Lazarus people in your life? How are they bound? How can you help them become free?