

Death Takes A Holiday
John 11:1-44
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In the 1934 film *Death Takes A Holiday*, the anthropomorphized Death disguises himself as a man and travels to Earth to try to discover why humanity fears him so much. He interacts with several different people, develops relationships with each of them, and influences their thoughts about death as he ponders aloud.

Death works as the main character of the film because the act of dying is the most universal experience humanity encounters, the one thing that we all know awaits at some point. It is, in multiple ways, the ultimate life experience. Because the main character in the film is Death himself, there is a universal point of connection for any viewer who watches the movie.

In the film, the character Death falls in love with a beautiful woman named Grazia. As this relationship buds, she tells him this:

You seem to come from a distant place. When I'm with you, I see depths in your eyes that are like the worlds I visit in sleep. And beneath your words is a sound I've heard in dreams. When you leave me, the light goes from the sky. You're like the mystery that's just beyond sight and sound. Always just beyond my reach. Something that draws and...frightens me.¹

It is unclear if she says these things because of their love or because he is Death. The line separating love and death is a thin one, the two absolutes that we string our lives between.

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Since Easter, we've been working our way through the gospel of John. We started, during Holy Week, with scenes from the last few days of Christ's life. We continued through the Easter season with stories relevant to Jesus' resurrection. Then, at Pentecost, we reset and jumped to the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, and we've spent all summer working through those stories. We are nearing the end of that ministry and the end of our study of this gospel.

Because we haven't gone through the gospel in chronological order, we currently find ourselves in the middle of John despite the fact that we're approaching the end of this theme. In fact, John 11 is the chapter exactly in the middle of the 21 chapters of John. As a result, the narrative of John 11 is the apex of this gospel. The previous ten chapters have built up to this scene, and the following ten chapters will wind us back down. This is the mountaintop.

It's a good story for a mountaintop. It features beloved characters that we're already familiar with, moments of suspense and surprise, and the determined and devout faith of Martha while others are lost or fading. And it is a story about death...and about love...and as a result, about life itself.

It is also a story about Jesus. Unlike some of the passages we've encountered in the past few weeks, where Jesus is present but not necessarily central, here Jesus is very much an emphasized focal point. As a result, just as the story of Lazarus is the apex of the gospel of

¹ Mitchell Leisen, dir. *Death Takes A Holiday*. (Los Angeles: Paramount Studios, 1934).

John, it is also an apex in our understanding of two vital qualities of the essence, the character of Jesus.

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The resurrection of Lazarus is the final of Jesus' seven signs in John—after this, while he will continue to teach and to minister in a variety of ways, he will perform no miracles.² In all fairness, it's hard to imagine him topping this one. Jesus has already provided celebration, nourishment, calm, healing, and enlightenment as part of his signs...but here, he provides life. He mimics God the Creator.

There are other stories in our Bible where resurrections take place—resurrections where prophets other than Jesus pray the prayers that reinstate life. But none of those stories includes the drama and power of Lazarus; none of them features a deceased person who has laid in the tomb for four days. They are stories about calling off death. Lazarus is a story about life emerging where there is none, where there isn't even hope for life.

As a result, this is the moment in all of Jesus' life where he lets his divinity shine forth the most. It is the most God-like thing that he does in all of our gospels. It could be possible, based on the miracles only from the synoptics, to call Jesus only The Great Physician, only the Eternal Provider, or only the One in Touch with Nature...but here, when he summons life from a hole of death, raising a man who had been in the ground for four days, he is undeniably God.

CS Lewis writes, in *Mere Christianity*, that the idea of Jesus as a great moral teacher but not the Son of God is ludicrous and dangerous:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil...Let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.³

The idea of Jesus as wholly divine is prevalent throughout the gospel of John. Here, with Lazarus in the middle of the book, his Godly essence peaks.

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The idea of Jesus as wholly human is also prevalent throughout the gospel of John. Here, with Lazarus in the middle of the book, his human character likewise peaks.

The gospel of John begins with the most ethereal description of Christ—not a baby born in a manger, but the poetic prologue about The Word. But part of that prologue asserts “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”⁴ Invoking the image of flesh is a decisive and clear statement about the body of Christ. Likewise, the end of this gospel includes the stories of Thomas touching the risen Jesus' hands and of Jesus eating a meal with his disciples on the beach. In between, he gets hungry and tired, requiring the same human needs of food and shelter. The entire gospel of John is a testimony to the human form of Jesus.

² The resurrection itself is, of course, a miracle, but most scholars consider this the work of God the Father with Jesus as the recipient of the miracle and therefore do not count it among Jesus' seven signs in John.

³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1960), 56.

⁴ John 1:14

It is, however, a testimony not only to his human body but also to his human heart. We, again, see Jesus show emotion throughout the gospel of John...but perhaps nowhere does Jesus' emotion emerge as clearly and evocatively as in the famously "shortest verse in the Bible," verse 35: "Jesus wept."

I have read those nine letters hundreds, maybe thousands, of times. They still strike me deep within, moving me to a place that the majesty of other scripture cannot. There is an inescapable power in the simplicity of those two words. They express Jesus' sadness over the loss of Lazarus, although he knows that Lazarus will return; they express his frustration with his friends who—even though they have traveled with him and listened carefully to his teaching for years—still don't seem to understand who he is or what he's about; they express the fear of his upcoming arrest, trial, and crucifixion. They could even express his joy that Martha seems to have faith in him, the lone ray of light in the midst of the turbulence he cannot escape. If preachers could express as much as John does in two words, worship services would be twenty minutes shorter.

Part of why I have read that verse so much is that it is conveying so many things, and I think it is probably impossible for me to understand everything that is in there, even after multiple readings. Jesus is experiencing, at least, a slew of emotions: anger, sorrow, frustration, fear, denial, remorse, joy, acceptance, relief. Some of those emotions seem contradictory, but anyone who has lived long enough knows that they can occur at the same time. Jesus weeps...and when he does, we are allowed a glimpse of him at his most human.

The essence of Jesus as wholly divine *and* wholly human comes to a head here, halfway through the gospel of John. Jesus wept.

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I've spent most of this week trying to figure out if this passage is more about death or life or something else entirely. In the end, I think it's about all things that are constantly present and yet exquisitely mysterious. Death is the most certain thing in any of our lives, and yet no one really knows what it's like. Love is ubiquitous and yet, when described, it is often reduced to banalities. Love and death are the mysterious absolutes that draw us and frighten us, certainties that we can never explain or truly grasp.

Grazia's words from *Death Takes A Holiday* are true for love and death...and for faith:

You seem to come from a distant place. When I'm with you, I see depths in your eyes that are like the worlds I visit in sleep. And beneath your words is a sound I've heard in dreams. When you leave me, the light goes from the sky. You're like the mystery that's just beyond sight and sound. Always just beyond my reach. Something that draws and...frightens me.⁵

In our faith, this is how we know Jesus. He is, undeniably, wholly God *and* wholly human. Even though we do not really understand how or why, we contend that he is. Our faith is rock solid and yet elusive. That in-between place is where we find the most precious elements of the reality of our lives. We know that our faith—like our life and death, like our love—is both real and important precisely because it is so pervasive and yet we do not comprehend it. We are invited to grasp the ineffable—whether that is God or love or life or death or anything in between—to grasp it fleetingly, if we choose, in the uncertain certainty of faith.

⁵ Mitchell Leisen, dir. *Death Takes A Holiday*. (Los Angeles: Paramount Studios, 1934).