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'By now there will be a stench': An excerpt from 'Lazarus, Come Forth!'

John Dear | Oct. 11, 2011 On the Road to Peace

height="180" width="120" My new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, is out this week. It portrays Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. Here is an excerpt from chapter eight, about the scene where Martha tries to stop Jesus from raising Lazarus. It's a powerful moment where we realize that, quite frankly, none of us, even the best of us, want Jesus' gift of resurrection and all its glorious social, economic and political implications. We have made peace with the culture of war and death. Jesus, on the other hand, is determined to bring us to the fullness of life. Thank God! I hope you enjoy the book.

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Standing before Lazarus's tomb, Jesus commands, "Take away the stone." And how does the great disciple Martha respond? She tries to stop him! Earlier she said, "Yes, Lord?" Now she says, "No, Lord." In effect: "Nothing can be done; Lazarus is gone. You're too late. Face it, death has won."

Here at the height of the story, Jesus' friend and disciple resists the great commandment. "Let the stone remain where it is. Don't trouble us any more ? even if you are the Son of God. Even the Son of God must admit the reality of death. Leave us to our misery and despair. Don't disturb my brother's bones. We're having a hard enough time as it is. Please don't make a scene. Please don't make us do something. Please don't disrupt the tomb. We don't want your intervention. We've made peace with death."

And then her last-ditch effort to impress on him the finality of it all: "Lord, by now there will be a stench!"

One of the most comical lines in the Gospel ? if it were not so tragic.

There's a parallel here to the Gospel of Luke. In Luke, Peter affirms Jesus as the Messiah, but objects to the idea of Jesus facing torture and execution. Here in John, Martha issues a similar objection. Likewise, she objects to his confronting death.

Her objection helps us understand our own predicament. "Lord, by now there will be a stench," she says to Jesus. "He's been dead for four days." It's the voice of raw despair, the voice of no-hope-whatsoever, the voice that says, "Life is a dead end. Once you're dead, you're dead. Evil powers always get the upper hand." Don't we harbor this attitude of disappointment all the time? This is our underlying confession to Jesus: "You're too late. You're absent, irrelevant, impotent. Nothing can be done. Don't bother making us try."

On top of this is the bitter irony. In her objection, Martha tries to prevent Jesus from raising Lazarus! She does what we all do: object to, resist and disobey the commandment to take away the stone. She knows that exposing the body will be a messy, unseemly affair. She has in mind the scene to follow ? the putrid flesh, the swarm of flies, the crusted membranes. And the stench. The Mosaic cleanliness laws will be shot to hell. The month of

mourning will be knocked off course. She strives to keep things under control?Jesus included. In the face of death, she tries to manage and control the God of life.

Why would she do this? Why do we? The answer is simple, and shocking: *we do not want resurrection!* The idea of new life sets us on our heels. We can't handle that much hope, that much freedom. The implications overwhelm us. We prefer the comfortable predictability of the culture of death. War is familiar, so long as it doesn't come to our own front door. Predictable too are the Pentagon and the nuclear labs of Los Alamos and the chicanery of Wall Street and the overweening power of transnational corporations. We've made our peace with all the metaphors of Death ? poverty, capital punishment, unmanned drones, nuclear weapons, and global warming. Trying to keep it distant, we've made peace with the Tomb.

Anyone involved in peace-and-justice work knows this firsthand ? the minute you publicly raise discomfiting questions, you inevitably make a stink. People get upset. They say, "Why are you doing this? Why mess everything up? Everything was fine the way it was. Stop rocking the boat. Stop disturbing our peace! Think of the stench!"

But the commandment comes down and it won't go away: *Take away the stone!*

It's hard to understand why we resist the peacemaking ways of Jesus. But for anyone who cares about the spiritual life, the human family and the fate of the earth, understanding is crucial.

In my own work as a spiritual director, I have seen over and over again how God comes intimately close to love and guide us, and in each instance we pull back. We resist the movement of God. It's a typical human reaction. We fail to recognize God's life-giving work among us as a gift, and we find it hard to recognize our own resistance. This is why a spiritual director is such a treasure. He or she can point out the presence of God in our lives, how God tries to lead us to new life, and how new life is good for us, even our most fundamental desire.

A director challenges us to enter our prayer mindful that God is gentle, loving, and nonviolent; that God only wants what is good for us; that God is trustworthy. God tries to lead us to the fullness of life, to resurrection ? and not only individually but as a culture. God wants us to walk out of the tombs of death where we are stuck and unaware. The spiritual life is a long journey of learning not to resist God. As we let go of resistance, hurts and fear, as we allow God's word to take root in us, we'll find ourselves consoled. We'll become peaceful, even joyful. We will move closer toward oneness with God and creation. We'll feel more alive ? and get to work rolling away the stone that others too may walk toward new life.

St. Ignatius, one of the great spiritual teachers of all time, taught that we're not supposed to live in desolation. We are supposed to live in the consolation of God's love and peace ? personally, communally and globally. We're supposed to live life to the full, and to help one another do the same. When we learn not to resist God, and to do what God wants, we discover deeper sources of life. To return to the metaphor, we find ourselves raised to new life. We find ourselves walking out of our own tombs.

This is, after all, John's thesis?God offering us new life. "Take away the stone." The commandment is not rescinded. Move the stone that keeps us under the thumb of death, that imprisons our families and friends in the conventions of death, that deceives our churches into sanctioning war, that makes us all cogs in the nation's killing machine. "Take away the stone." It's a commandment we resist, each one of us. And a commandment we resist corporately too?churches, nations, the entire human family.

And so most of us pass our days as if we are treading water. We barely make it through the array of crises and hardships?family divisions, health issues, job loss, financial difficulties, and tensions and anxieties of all kinds. Little energy remains to acknowledge the realities of war, starvation, executions, nuclear weapons and climate change. We turn away, preoccupied with surviving our loneliness, despair and dread. This is how we make

peace with Death. We find a precarious stasis point at which we hold despair at bay, and we hang on as best we can. In the meantime we grant Death leave to stalk the earth and do its worse. So long as we don't have to see its victims. And when that strategy fails finally, in our dark despair we eye our own death as a way out. We know nothing of new beginnings.

Indeed, we live in the stench of death and do not even know it. The nonviolent Jesus would lead us into the fresh air of life and peace.

Seemingly secure at our stasis point, we do not want authentic change. We fear the disruption of our lives. We delude ourselves that this is happiness, though a little introspection will reveal just how exhausted and miserable we are. In fact, keeping awareness at arm's length has exhausted nearly everyone we know. It's our common lot, accommodating the culture of war. "Taking away the stone," we fear, will only make our lives worse, will set us at odds.

Certainly, the media and the government emphasize the point. They tell us it's not in our best interest to look skeptically at the ways of death. Or even to ponder them. Of course it's not in their interest that we do. Those who run the culture enjoy their power and privilege. It's in their interest to keep things under control. Large shifts in priorities threaten their lofty perch and, at the first breeze of change, they roll out the propaganda machine that indoctrinates and programs us.

Put shortly: "The way things are is the way things should be."

Movements for justice that raise the cry "take away the stone" are derided and ignored. Rulers certainly do not want to see the Pentagon disarmed or to see Los Alamos and Livermore Labs converted to peaceful purposes. It would drain the elite of their power of coercion and their capacity to amass wealth. Weapons, they insist, are our true benefactors. Our science of war is our true security.

So our culture has its roots in fear and death. And we who are misled go along complacently with the accelerating cycle downward toward violence. For a culture rooted in death ? a culture that spawns wealth from death ? must find an outlet for inflicting it.

In our blindness, we think (when we think at all), "It is what it is." Has an almost philosophical ring. But what lies beneath it is a lack of imagination. We cannot imagine any other way. How is a culture free of nuclear weapons possible? Isn't corporate greed just part of the fabric of life? What would a world free from deathly powers even look like? How would a society make such enormous changes in any case? A culture not reliant on armaments? Think of how messy that would be. That fresh air, we presume, would be the worst stench.

Better to keep ideas like that on the fringes, and to paint people who espouse such ideas as unbalanced fanatics, unwashed subversives or ungrateful traitors.

So we squander the promise of John's Gospel, that if we confront death we'll be given new life ? a kind of resurrection of family, friends, and community. And then it will dawn on us just how stuck in the stench of despair we were. Only then will we understand that what we regarded as peace and happiness was a phony sham. It was merely a case of playing it safe, of complying with death in the hope that it would pass on by. It's a craven inclination that has all but killed us spiritually.

Martha protests ? *don't make us do that, Jesus!* She tries to stop him. But he's not dissuaded. He turns and puts the question to her: "Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?" We do not remember him ever asking her this. But we know he asked if she believed that he was the resurrection and the life. He had earlier told his disciples that Lazarus's death would reveal the glory of God. Martha, stunned into silence, says no more. His authority prevails. And so we come to the astonishing declaration of verse 41:

They took away the stone.

"Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?" It's a question Jesus puts to each of us. John's Gospel brims with talk about faith and belief, blindness and seeing. It refers many times to Jesus' coming glory and the glory of God. He has come into the world that we might believe ? that we might experience the glory of God, and thereby have life to the full.

Martha remains silent. And perhaps that's the best way for us to respond too. Stay with the question in silence; let it linger in the heart. Then get to work rolling away the stone wherever people are mired in the culture of death. If we take on the task and roll away the stone, like Martha, we too will see the glory of God.

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John Dear's new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, is available from Amazon.com [1]. Next year, John will undertake a national book tour to discuss this Gospel confrontation of the God of life and peace against the culture of death and war. To host John for an evening talk, send an email through his website [2]. His other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings [3]*; *Put Down Your Sword [4]* and *A Persistent Peace [5]*, are also available from Amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn [6]. For more information, go to John Dear's website [2].

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