

Out of the Depths

John 11:1–45

Prayer Book

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Today's Bible Reading

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Additional Bible Readings

Ezekiel 37:1–14

Psalm 130

Romans 8:6–11

When we are overwhelmed or in despair, we turn again to you, O God, for you feel our anguish and will lift us up. Breathe your spirit into us and give us new life so that we may walk in hope. Amen.

In **John 11:1–45**, what might seem to be a disjointed conversation between Jesus and the disciples contains complex layers of imagery and allusions to Jesus' coming anointing, death, and resurrection. The act of raising Lazarus happens right at the end of the narrative, followed by the observation that some people "believed in him."

Jewish understanding was that it took three days for a soul to leave the body completely; thus, Lazarus had been dead long enough to have nothing left other than a body decaying rapidly in the desert heat. This fact doesn't quite explain Jesus' delay. When Jesus does decide to return to Judea, the disciples are concerned for his safety, but the need to "work while it is still light" drives Jesus on. Thomas expresses loyalty and fear but also foreshadows Jesus' self-sacrifice.

Burial took place immediately after death in the hot climate of the Middle East, and ritual mourning followed. Family, especially the women, sat in the home and were visited by friends. However, when Jesus approaches, Martha defies custom and goes to meet him. Was she impatient for his arrival, or was she protecting Jesus from a potentially hostile gathering? Her statement, perhaps, reveals Martha's grief. She understands the Jewish teaching of resurrection at the last days but finds something hopeful in what Jesus says. She puts her faith entirely in him.

Mary's plea to Jesus is similar to Martha's, and the pathos of the situation disturbs Jesus greatly. Martha, Mary, and the assembled mourners all ask the same question – why didn't Jesus come and heal Lazarus? Jesus' prayer sums up the purpose of this final sign. God's glory will indeed be revealed, but at enormous pain and cost to both Jesus and his friends. Jesus then issues three commands.

Everyone has a task to do. Jesus calls Lazarus back to life, but it is the community that rolls away the stone and unbinds Lazarus from the trappings of death and releases him. ¹