

“SHED THE DEAD THREADS”

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JOHN 11:38-44

Then Jesus, again groaning in Himself, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it.

Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days."

Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?"

Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead man was lying. And Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me."

Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth.

Jesus said to them, "Loose him, and let him go."

The undertaker drove the hearse to a graveyard which was situated on a hill overlooking the little town. It was a gloomy, drizzly day, a perfect day for a funeral.

Since it was raining, the grass was slick and the footing treacherous. As the pall bearers walked the casket to the burial spot they slipped and dropped the box. It started sliding down the hill toward the town.

The undertaker was chasing the run-away casket.

The coffin hit the curb, went airborne, and sailed through the window of the local pharmacy. It glided through the front of the store, and right out the back.

This all caught the pharmacist by surprise.

He was in a back room when he heard the terrible crash. He ran out to the counter just about the time the funeral director came racing through the front door. Out of habit the pharmacist asked him, "Can I help you?"

The out-of-breath undertaker cleared his throat and shouted, "Yea, got anything that'll stop this coffin?"

Well, our Lord Jesus was great at stopping coffins.

Once, Jesus entered a village called Nain where He ran headlong into a funeral procession. Pallbearers were carrying a boy's corpse on a wicker stretcher.

Jesus looked with pity at the boy's mother, and told her to stop weeping. *Now, who in their right mind has the nerve to tell a grieving mother to dry her tears?*

That's when Jesus walked right up to the coffin and commanded, "Young man... arise" The kid bolted up in bed as if he'd been awakened from an afternoon nap.

Yes, Jesus was good at busting up funerals.

Search the Gospel accounts and you'll find no mention of anyone ever dying in Jesus' presence.

When He commanded Jarius' dead daughter, "Little girl, arise..." Luke 8:55 says, "Then her spirit returned, and she arose immediately. And that's not all! "He commanded that she be given something to eat."

Hey, Jesus knew how to stop a coffin!

Yet the situation with Lazarus seemed different.

With Lazarus, we're not talking about a corpse that's still warm - that's still burping out leftover gases from deflating lungs. Lazarus' body is room temperature.

He's been dead for four days - a long weekend.

This isn't a patient still wearing his hospital ID bracelet - who's just had the sheet pulled over his head. This guy is dead, buried, and pushing up daisies.

Lazarus' body was prepped and packed in a tomb.

Rigor mortis and decomposition had already set in. A stone had been rolled in place to contain the stench.

For Jesus to resurrect Lazarus He'd have to exhume a body. He'd have to put rotting flesh back on brittle bones! To pull this off it would make the boy at Nain, and Jarius' daughter, look like cheap card tricks.

This is a miracle of unprecedented magnitude!

Once the stone had been reluctantly rolled off the mouth of the cave... if you'd poked your head in for a peek, you would've seen a body lying on a rock shelf.

There were usually several bodies shelved in the same tomb. There's no way to know for sure, but this particular cave may've been crowded with corpses.

Today we preserve a dead body with chemicals, but the Jews didn't adhere to embalming. They wrapped a corpse in tightly wound cloth strips - in almost mummy-like fashion. John calls the wrappings "graveclothes."

The word could be translated "*grave bandages.*"

In these folds were placed ointments, and perfumes, and spices - that stifled the smell... A handkerchief was placed over the face of the corpse to tie up the chin. This kept the corpse's jaw from dangling open...

If you had peeked into the tomb you would've seen Lazarus - all wrapped like a Christmas present - placed under the tree for the day of resurrection.

It reminds me of the henpecked husband who was advised by his buddy to assert himself. "*Don't allow your wife to dominate you and push you around. Don't you know the husband is supposed to be the king of his castle. You need to wear the britches in your family. Go home and*

show your wife that you're the boss." The husband took his advice, rushed home, slammed the door, and growled at his wife, "From now on, you're taking orders from me. I want supper now. And when it's on the table - go upstairs, and lay out my best clothes. I'm going out with the boys and you're staying home. And one more thing... do you know who's going to shine my shoes, and iron my shirt?"

His wife answered calmly, "Yep, the undertaker." Like the Jews this man was preparing a set of graveclothes.

Understand, when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, He did it not only to illustrate His power, but to also teach a spiritual lesson. In John's Gospel Jesus' miracles are referred to as "signs" – Yes, *the events actually happened, but they pointed to deeper truths.*

Today, Jesus doesn't break up every funeral - He hasn't emptied ever grave - nevertheless, *Jesus is still the resurrection and the life - forever and for now.*

He raises our dead spirit, and creates new life in us. Jesus births spiritual vitality and supernatural strength in believing hearts. He wants us to be fully alive!

This wonderful story in John 11 teaches a lesson that applies to all believers... *Jesus raises a dead man. Then his friends are commanded to take off his graveclothes. And this is the Christian life in a nutshell!*

The following description may surprise you, but *the world we live in is a graveyard full of walking corpses.*

Physically, people are alive. Their lungs inhale and exhale, their heart pumps blood, their muscles stretch and move. *They're alive physically, but dead spiritually.*

Death means separation... Physical death occurs when the body is separated from the spirit. *Spiritual death* occurs when man's spirit is separated from God.

The Bible teaches that this separation exists from birth. Man is born into sin. He's conceived separated from God. A human being grows up, goes to school, and reaches maturity - unaware that there's a whole life they've never discovered. They're familiar with the material world, but dead to God and the things of God.

And understand death has no degrees. If you're dead in sin and separated from God you're not *more dead* or *less dead* than the next guy. *Dead is dead.*

There are degrees of decay. Among dead folks there are some bodies more rotten and stink worse than others, *but everyone who's dead is equally dead.*

And the same is true with the walking dead...

Some people have reached a further degree of corruption than others. There're some real stinkers out there – their rottenness is obvious. Whereas, there are other people who somehow manage to mask their stench. They've bulked up on preservatives. They're not as corrupt as others, *but they're just as dead.*

If you're without Christ there's a good chance your life is riddled and saddled with problems. If I were to ask you to name them you might say, *"I'm stressed. I'm lonely. I'm angry. I'm worried. I'm full of lust or hate..."*

Before I came to Jesus I had similar problems...

But Jesus would shorten your lists of maladies. These aren't the problems He sees. He knows they're symptoms of a much deeper, more profound problem. Jesus would simplify your diagnosis. He'd tell you that your main problem is you're dead. You're a spiritual Lazarus - dead to God and the life He gives.

Jesus wants to work *spiritually* in you the same miracle He worked *physically* in Lazarus. He wants to resurrect your spirit, and spark spiritual life in you - *peace and purpose, happiness and wholeness, pleasantness and power, forgiveness and fulfillment, a sense of direction, an awareness of God's presence...*

Ephesians 2:4-5 tell us, "But God, Who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ." Jesus *made us alive!*

He lights a spark! Like hot-wiring a cold car - Jesus finds your wire and God's wire and hits them together.

Jesus initiates a connection between you and God.

Lazarus bounded from the tomb – a man who was dead was now alive – *but the story doesn't end there...*

For Lazarus was still bound in his graveclothes.

How a mummy-like Lazarus moved to the door of the cave we're not sure. John tells us his hands and feet were bound. If they were bound individually it would've hinder his movement - if they were bound together it would've required God's power to propel Him into the open doorway. Either way, Lazarus was restricted...

He was alive, but he was clothed in a shroud.

Lazarus has a new lease on life, a new start, a new birth, new life coursing through his veins, new power and potential – but he's standing there in graveclothes.

Ole Lazarus might be fashionably dressed among corpses, but he's not dressed for the land of the living.

Lazarus is still wearing his *dead threads!*

And how about you? In a spiritual sense, are you still wearing *dead threads*? Are you wearing attitudes and habits and perspectives that restrict your freedom?

Are you bound by certain emotions and passions?

Do you get entangled by certain sins? Do you not feel free to be the person Jesus wants you to be?

If so, the problem is graveclothes!

You're alive in Christ. You have an inner peace. You have the private witness of the Holy Spirit in your heart that you belong to God. Your desire is to obey God and love others - you're alive... but you're still wearing a shroud. There're issues in your life that hinder you...

It's time that we all *shed the dead threads.*

The problem though, is that unlike Lazarus' shroud, spiritual graveclothes are not always easily identified.

Dead threads come in different styles, and patterns, and colors... *How do you spot graveclothes?*

Well, let's use the illustration of Lazarus. His graveclothes served three purposes: **they restricted his movements - they masked his stench - they preserved a doctrine, without stirring up faith.**

And you'll find the graveclothes in your life when you identify the issues that have the same effect on you...

First, graveclothes are those issues that bind you and restrict you from being what God wants you to be.

Lazarus was alive, but he was handcuffed.

He was alive, but he couldn't enjoy His new life, and its freedom. He was restricted by bands of cloth.

If Jesus hadn't commanded the onlookers to loose him, it wouldn't have taken the ole boy long to feel bound and stifled – **as good as dead all over again.**

And this is what happens to Christians.

We're alive in Christ, but after you've lived awhile tied up in sin and failure you feel trapped. *You're alive, but just barely...* Notice verse 44, how bound Lazarus must've felt. Gravecloths covered his hands, feet, face.

And they'll cover the same three areas in your life...

*They'll cover **your hands*** – they'll restrict your reach, and keep you from grabbing hold of God's blessings.

*They'll cover **your feet*** – they'll hinder your walk with the Lord, and the practical application of your faith.

*They'll cover **your face*** – they'll keep eyes blind, and your mouth shut when it should be sharing your faith.

Graveclothes over our hands, feet, and face keep us from **stretching out, stepping out, and speaking out.**

Understand, graveclothes keep you from **stretching out** and grasping hold of God's best for your life...

If you're a believer in Jesus you're cleansed and forgiven. You're accepted in Christ. You're as right with God as you'll ever get... *yet, I know believers who still have a difficult time feeling God's forgiveness.* They're haunted by issues of guilt - of unworthiness – of doubt.

You can be a child of God, yet feel like an orphan.

And this prohibits me from reaching out to Jesus and laying hold of the blessings His blood has purchased.

We need to be *taught* – or better yet, *shown* – the length, height, width and and breadth of God's love.

Rather than tied down by doubt, all believers should be assured that God's grace provides all that we need.

Graveclothes keep me from *stretching out* - they bind my hands. But they also keep me from **stepping out - they bind my feet.** It's hard to walk in a shroud.

Graveclothes tie me down, and keep me from serving God in vital ways. *How can you walk with the Lord if you're not sure of your status in the Lord?*

When Nick was a tot, he and I went to the Braves game one night. He asked me if baseball had initials like football or basketball... *the NFL... or the NBA...*

Then he said, **"Dad, you play in the EDL."** *"What's the EDL?"* He said, **"Every Day Living."** We all play in the EDL, and this is where graveclothes hinder us.

New life in Christ is a miracle – it's the part of salvation only God can do. But living it out in every day life is our part - and it involves shedding graveclothes.

Attitudes that characterized our life apart from Christ need to be shed... *selfishness, laziness, worldliness, bitterness, stubbornness* get in the way of living the life God puts in us. These are attitudes you learned when you were dead to God, but they linger after conversion.

You've got to shed these dead attitudes. A vibrant, relevant Christianity comes when you free up your thinking, and really begin to live out what you believe.

Graveclothes keep me from *stretching out, stepping out, and speaking out*. Lazarus had a cloth laid over his face. It tied up his chin to keep the corpses' jaw from dangling open and his mouth shut up tight.

And spiritual graveclothes are also those issues that keep us from opening our mouth and praising God - or sharing our faith. Sealed lips are marks of a corpse.

A mouth full of praise - a voice that stands up for Jesus - these are the signs of life. Identify the source of your silence, and then get rid of the graveclothes!

Fear of people - fear of making waves - fear of controversy - can also be considered graveclothes.

I admire Dan Cathy, president of Chick-Fil-A for his willingness to stand up for the biblical definition of marriage... From now on, I'm going to eat no chicken!

Dan Cathy eats chicken, but he sure isn't one.

Fear becomes a gag in the mouth of a believer. We need to shed those dead threads and speak up.

But there are other graveclothes of which we need to be aware... Graveclothes bound the corpse, but as I said earlier, they also served other purposes...

Remember, they masked the smell of rotting flesh. In the folds of the cloths the Jews placed ointments, spices, and perfumes that covered the odor of death.

Notice Martha's concern in verse 39. When Jesus commands for the stone to be rolled away, Lazarus' sister says (and I'll quote her from the OKJV), "**Lord, by this time he stinketh...**" I'll bet he did... stinketh!

Modern morticians say bodies don't deteriorate as quickly today as in the past. It's largely due to the chemical preservatives we put in our food.

Apparently, today's diet will help kill you, but look on the bright side - it provides your corpse a longer shelf-life, and saves the mortician some embalming fluid.

Today, you can go to a funeral four days after a person dies, and they'll smell okay - a little like formaldehyde maybe - but okay. Lazarus though, after four days, smelled like a stink bomb. Despite the graveclothes, Martha, and the family, didn't want the tomb opened because of the atrocious stench.

Years ago, we had one of our family pets die... a rabbit named "*Pinky*"... Pinky bit the dust.

In fact, several days elapsed between Pinky's death and burial. *You know what big families rabbits have - it took awhile to get all the relatives in for the funeral.*

Being the resident pastor I had the privilege of officiating the funeral. I'll never forget my sermon. I said, "**Hare, lies the rabbit. Life is short. We're hare today, gone tomorrow.**" It was not one of my more memorable sermons. The kids wanted God to raise Pinky from the dead, but it was obviously not His will.

The smell though did make for a hare-raising experience. By the time we buried poor "Pinky" – he had turned into "stinky." The whole backyard reeked.

And this is another reason for graveclothes - there are spiritual cloths that mask over the odor of death.

Before you and I came to Christ we too were a *rotting rabbit*. The stench of our sin rose up to heaven.

Yet rather than confessing and repenting of our sin – some of us tried to cover up the smell with good works, and religious rituals, and charitable deeds.

In fact, the more we stunk the better we tried to look.

The Pharisees were a classic example of this sort of hypocrisy. They were legalists – stringent and uncompromising in their observance of the Jewish Law. They toed the line. Every "t" was crossed - every "i" was dotted. But there was hatred, pride, selfishness inside – **they were outwardly clean, but inwardly rotten.**

In Matthew 23:27 Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees, "For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness." They were like tombs covered with a fresh coat of paint... but don't move the stone... *it stinketh on the inside!*

Every Christian needs to strip away the graveclothes of hypocrisy. A true Christian is an authentic person.

He's confessed all, so there's nothing to hide... She's no longer masking over - so she's free to be herself.

Some of you are hiding the real you. Your coming to church on Sunday is shrouding the unethical practices that go on the other six days... You pray long prayers at mealtime, because you don't think about God any other time of the day... You give a little money to the Lord because you know He doesn't have your life...

Before we buried Pinky what if I'd gone into my backyard, and spent the day squirting a case of Febreze into the air to try and mask the odor.

This would be foolish. *If I truly wanted to get rid of the smell, wouldn't it be easier to just bury the rabbit?*

Likewise, stop trying to mask your sin - admit it, repent of it, and ask God to help you overcome it.

Putting off graveclothes can mean turning loose of ritualism, and legalism - stuff that makes you feel proud and self-righteousness. Be honest with yourself. Learn to trust in the righteousness of Jesus and live according to faith. [Swap graveclothes for graceclothes.](#)

Finally, realize the use of graveclothes derived from a Jewish doctrine. The Jews believed - and the Bible teaches - God will one day resurrect everybody's body.

Every human body - buried or cremated - will be resurrected and reunited with its spirit. To wrap a body in a way that was meant to preserve it, was a tip of the hat to that belief. It affirmed a future resurrection.

When Lazarus' family wrapped him in graveclothes it was because of their belief in the doctrine of the resurrection. But after Jesus' miracle, though they still believed in a future resurrection, you could hardly call it the same belief. "**Resurrection**" had new meaning...

Here's what I'm saying, graveclothes can represent a doctrine - that's distant or future - we believe it, but it's far from relevant. It doesn't require faith in the present.

For example, we can affirm that God created all things, without ever looking to God to reveal His creativity in us - to do a new work in our lives today.

We believe Jesus will one day return and rapture the Church. But what about the fact He wants to come to us every day and enrapture our hearts with His love?

When we become content in the affirmation of a creed, or in the knowledge of a Bible doctrine - without desiring God Himself we've settled for graveclothes.

God's promise is *new life* and *present power*.

To celebrate God's past work or future glory - without looking for Him to work in my present - is a graveclothes-mentality, and it needs to be put away.

In fact, this was the problem Martha had when Jesus first arrived. Lazarus was not the only person wearing graveclothes. When Jesus told Martha her brother would rise again, she said in verse 24, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

To Martha the resurrection was a doctrine – it was a statement of faith – *but it wasn't a reality in her heart*.

Her doctrine was graveclothes. She had yet to apply the power of the resurrection to her present situation.

I love Jesus' response to Martha. He said, "I am the resurrection and the life." In other words, *I embody the truth and power of what you believe*. Jesus can take the truth *off the page of your Bible, and out of the distant future* - and make it a reality in your life today.

Martha, believed in a promise for the future, but Jesus wanted to take the power of that promise and make it real in her life at that very moment.

Hey, God wants us to believe in sound doctrine and biblical truth, but doctrine alone is a shroud when we don't press beyond it and embrace its reality. Martha needed faith... not in *a precept*, but in *a person*.

Which brings us to the \$1,000,000 question...

Once you've identified the graveclothes, how do you remove them? *And the answer might surprise you...*

Notice in verse 44 Jesus doesn't tell Lazarus to take off his own graveclothes. He told "them" - *Mary, Martha and the people at the tomb* - to "loose him, and let him go." It was up to his friends to unwrap his graveclothes.

And this is the responsibility that has totally eluded many of today's churches. New believers come to Jesus and receive the life He offers – a spiritual vitality, and strength, and awareness. They surge from death to life, and bounce into the doors of the church like Lazarus bounding into the opening of the tomb.

They're very alive... but they're still very bound.

The rest of us rejoice and thank God – then we walk away, back to our circle of friends - and leave them in their graveclothes - trying to figure out how to get free.

Imagine Mary and Martha turning up their noses at a resurrected Lazarus, and saying... "Look at that... if he's not going to reach out to us, then we're not going to reach out to him." *Lazarus' wasn't capable of stretching out or stepping out. He was still bound.*

And Lazarus is not the only one. We're all bound to some degree or another. Oh, we're alive in Christ, but we all have attitudes we should've shaken off long ago.

And we need each other's help! Paul Tournier once said, "There are two things we cannot do alone – one is to be married and the other is to be a Christian."

In reflecting on my Christian experience I'm thankful for friends and mentors who shared their faith with me, and helped me unwrap a few of my graveclothes.

I would've never learned of grace... or how to pray, or be a witness... or been opened to the work of the Holy Spirit... or understood Christian liberty... if these truths had not been modeled for me by other believers.

It's easier to shake off graveclothes once you've seen other people living without them... It encourages me to see myself as a new creation in Christ when other people are willing to see me in the same light...

In short, *Christians feed off each other's faith.*

We make a mistake to view fellowship as merely a social outlet, rather than as a catalyst for change. We need to use our interactions to challenge each other to godliness. The NT encourages us to admonish one another - to *egg on* one another to a deeper faith.

Our job as a Christian is to help each other get free.

That's why if you're alive in Christ, but struggling with graveclothes, you need a few friends at church!

Realize, *spiritual realities* aren't reinforced in a *secular world*... Take *grace* for example. Our world trains us to base our worth on our own performance.

To believe that God loves us and accepts us *just as we are* and *right where we're at* - on no other basis than faith in Jesus – is such a foreign concept.

Grace only exists in the Church!

Or what about *servanthood*... We find God's life when we give our lives away, and serve other people.

You don't learn that at Gwinnett College, or in public school. I know of no corporate seminar in America that offers employee training in Jesus-centered living.

Where do we go to learn these truths? And where can we find other people to help us learn the same truths? There is only one place... *the Church.*

You and I are all like Lazarus - alive in Christ, but in need of a little help to shake free... *And you and I are also like the folks standing by the grave* - we have a responsibility to help each other shed our graveclothes.

Jesus points to you - and He orders me, "Loose him, and let him go..." Then Jesus points to me - and He commands you, "Loose him, and let him go."

Let's help each other... *shed the dead threads!*