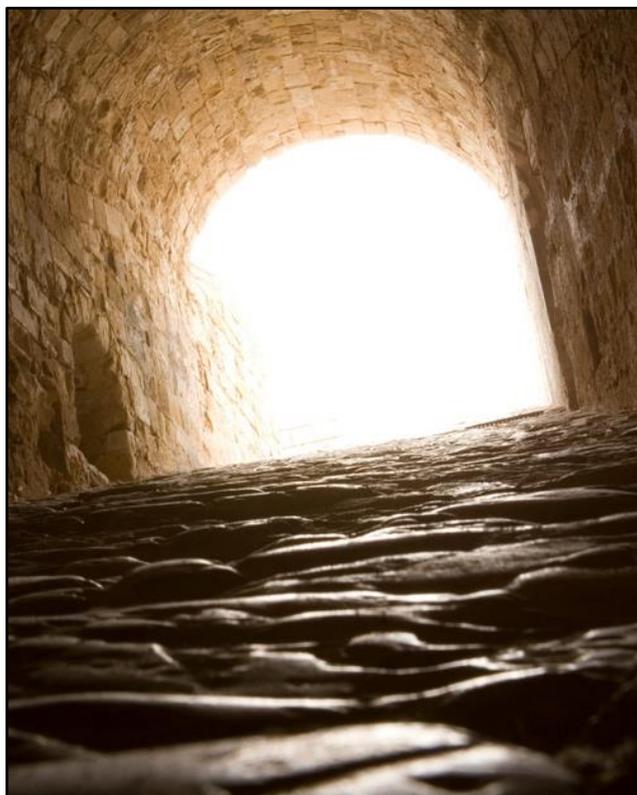


# **Reflection on Sunday 26 March 2023** **by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship**

*Gospel: John 11: 1-44 The Resurrection of Lazarus*



## **Emerging from a dark place**

Have you ever been in a dark place and wondered how you were ever going to get out? Have you ever been at the end of your tether with no end to your troubles in sight? If you haven't, then you are very lucky. If you have, you might understand how Lazarus must have felt, waking up in a tomb, bound by bandages, buried alive, with no hope of getting out.

I have never been buried alive, but I have been in some pretty dark places and I've seen it in the lives of other

people. And, in most cases, it takes somebody outside – maybe someone sent by God – to turn up on a rescue mission.

At the risk of repeating myself, as some of you know I used to be a journalist and was the Editor for a while of a business magazine called *Caterer & Hotelkeeper*, which covered the UK hospitality industry. Every year, we organised a big event at the Grosvenor House Hotel in London to celebrate the great and the good in the world of catering. There were awards for the best restaurant, best chef, best hotel, that kind of thing, and it was known as the 'Oscars of the Hospitality Industry'.

In the year 2000 – Millennium year – we moved the event from the Grosvenor House and, as a special one-off, held the awards in a huge marquee, a sort of circus big top, in the Honorary Artillery Company Ground in the City of London (some of you may know it). There were over 1,200 guests there, all seated, waiting for me to walk on stage and welcome everyone. I'm poised, at the bottom of a narrow set of stairs, in my black tie and with my lapel mic at the ready, surrounded by cables and lighting rigs and all sorts of equipment. I'm ready to go, when, suddenly, the music cuts out and the lights go off and we are plunged into pitch darkness. It's a disaster. The evening is ruined.

I step back from the stairs and say "%\$@!". I say one profane word, not once but several times, and I stamp my feet. I can't see a thing and I'm frightened of tripping over and breaking my leg. Being a Christian, I know what I just

said was wrong and I also know that it is time for a quick arrow prayer. *"Please God, help us, help me."*

At that moment, a voice in the darkness says: *"Don't worry, I've turned your microphone off. You're ok. I have a torch, follow me."* And a shadowy figure, I don't see who it is, leads me to safety and, more important, to a backstage bar.

Now, that's a simple story of a stranger rescuing someone in trouble and leading them out of the darkness. I'm not pretending that it was a critical matter of life and death, but I was very thankful and... the story doesn't end there. There's more.

Three weeks ago, I am walking past the Bank of England (as you do), heading to the tube station, when a complete stranger steps in front of me. He's about 50, Asian, slightly down at heel but he's smiling. *"Mr Forbes!"*, he exclaims. *"It's good to see you. How are you, my friend?"* I look at him blankly. *"I'm sorry,"* I say, *"remind me, I can't place you"*.

He says, *"Cast your mind back. What were you doing in the Millennium?"* I stumble around in my mind, trying to fix a point where I might have met this man. At last, I recall the Big Top and the awards ceremony. *"That's the one,"* says my new best friend. *"My name is Ali. I was helping set up the stage that night and I led you to safety when the lights went out. You were one of the nicest people I ever worked with."*

Well, I'm beginning to like this person now. I ask him how he is. He then launches into a long story about how his wife died some years ago and so, being from an Asian culture, he found another wife through an arranged marriage but, shortly afterwards, he came home one day and found her with another man. The man tried to attack him and so, in self-defence, Ali fought back and was subsequently, rather unfairly it seems to me, convicted of assault and sentenced to two years in prison.

He had been released two weeks before I met him. But life is tough and he is down on his luck and so depressed that, the night before we met, he had thought about jumping off London Bridge and committing suicide. A man talked to him for two hours and said don't give up, you never know what might happen tomorrow. So, he didn't jump but he had spent the night sleeping rough on the Embankment. He was definitely in a much darker place than the one he had rescued me from 23 years before.

There's a lot more to his story, but I'll spare you the details. Needless to say, the day after his suicide attempt, he finds himself talking to me outside Bank tube station and, putting aside my fear that this could be some kind of elaborate hoax, I go with him to a cash point and help him on his way. He is very grateful, and he sets off in the rain a happier man with hope in his heart.

That was me, by chance (was it by chance?) being in the right place at the right time to help someone in a dark place. And I've told you this story because that, for me, is what the

resurrection of Lazarus is partly about: people being in the darkest place and being helped into the light.

It's one of my favourite gospel stories because it's full of challenging insights and allegories.

*"Lord, the one whom you love is sick"*, say Martha and Mary, and they know Jesus can help. But when Jesus hears that Lazarus is sick, he stays right where he is for two more days. He loves Lazarus and his sisters and yet he seems to ignore them. It's a verse worth remembering when we grapple with the mystery of unanswered prayer, or with delayed answers to prayer. It will come good in the end if it's God's will.

And then, think about what it's like for Lazarus, waking up in that cave, wrapped tightly in cloth, unable to pull the covering off his face because his hands are still bound? As Scottish Minister Teri Peterson says in one of her Christian blogs, imagine that you are Lazarus. It's dark, and it stinks where you are. What you smell is your own flesh, that somehow isn't rotting anymore. But the stench is still hanging in the cave around you.

You hear a familiar voice, muffled, but easy to recognise. Your dearest friend is calling to you to come out. You don't even know which direction the door is, or how to get to it. But you wriggle around enough to get up, and you inch your way toward the light you see when they roll away the stone.

As you trip over yourself, struggling to get free, there is a gasp from the crowd that has gathered outside this cave. They are as surprised to see you as you are to be there.

And then you must decide. Do you fall back into the tomb, back into the darkness, or do you step out into the unknown? Because what lies ahead is completely new territory. No one has ever done this before. No one has ever been completely, unquestionably dead, and then been called back to life after being buried in a tomb for four days.

But here you are. As you stumble forward, that voice you love says, *“Unbind him. Let him go”*. And the bandages come off, and you can see Jesus standing there, tears streaming down his face, welcoming you back to life.

So, a few of the lessons from the story of Lazarus for me are:

- When you're down and out and in trouble, the right prayer, the right faith, as Mary and Martha demonstrated, will pull you through;
- Look out for the people that God sends to rescue you; the angels with a torch may not always be so obvious;
- And finally, God's will may not always be what you're expecting. Prepare to be surprised. Sometimes it's easy to feel abandoned by God, as Mary and Martha did. Has God's apparent absence in

your life ever made you grieve? I met a man once who said that, when he was made redundant, he wondered where God was, and if he still cared about him. It took him a long time to realise that God had not, in fact, abandoned him. It was the other way around – he had abandoned God.

So, if you're in a dark place, don't fall into the same trap. Amen.

Thanks to the blogs of [Jo Anne Taylor](#) and [Teri Peterson](#) for inspiration from the sermon [Dead Man Walking](#) © A Pastor Sings 2014