

Lazarus' Wake or Lazarus, Wake!

On his arrival at his assigned parish the housekeeper told the new priest that there was a wake that night and a funeral on the morrow. The deceased's name was Michael and, of course, the new priest knew nothing about him. So that night, after saying the prayers at the wake, the priest addressed the villagers who had assembled:

*"You know, my good people, that I am your new priest and because of that I do not know Michael lyin' here before you. So tomorrow I will be wantin' to say some kind words about Michael at the funeral. I would like your help with this. Think for a moment and then tell me some ways Michael here was a blessing to this community."*

This was met with stone silence. So the priest cleared his throat and announced again, *"Perhaps you did not understand me. All I want you to tell me is a few ways that Michael was a blessing to you folks who knew him."*

Now there was another long silence.

At this point the priest began to get a little angry so he said:

*"Well, listen now, you are not cooperating with your new priest at all. So I want you to know that I will not be adjourning this wake until you tell me at least one way that Michael was a blessing to this community!"*

Now there was an endless silence, with people coughing, and shifting uneasily in their seats. Finally, a wizened old codger sitting in the back row put up his hand.

*"Oh yes, my good man there in the back—tell me one blessing Michael gave to this community."*

*"Well..."* he replied, *"his brother was worse!"*

The Irish Wake is almost a part of the Irish consciousness. A Wake varies from party-like occasions for those who have lived long and fruitful lives to heartbreaking times when someone has left this world far too soon. But they all share many common customs.

When the person dies they are waked in their own home or the home of a close relative. A priest will say the rosary, in Gaelic, over the open coffin before the body leaves for the wake house. When the body arrives at the house the coffin is placed next to an opened window in the room. This is done to allow the spirit to leave the body, and the house. It is considered unlucky to stand between the coffin and the window.

Only close family members are in the room at this time. The priest will pray over the deceased, say the rosary again, and place the rosary beads between the fingers of the person.

The deceased will be clothed in their Sunday best and, if a man, he will be clean-shaven. The window will be closed after two hours, to stop their spirit from trying to return to the body.

Lit candles and holy water are placed next to the coffin. All the clocks in the house will be stopped and all mirrors will be covered up out of respect for the one who has passed.

After the family has said their own personal prayers the wake will be opened up to everyone else. The male head of the family will greet those who are attending the wake. The mourners enter the room where the body is laid and usually kneel and pray. Most will touch the fingers of the deceased after they have said their prayers and close family will often kiss the cheek of the person. The mourners are ushered into another room and offered tea and sandwiches. The time that a person stays at a wake depends on how close you were to the person who died.

Sometimes a wake will last only one night and other times two nights. The body is never left unattended during the entire wake and the women spend most of their time with the body.

The first night of the wake usually lasts till midnight and then the door is closed. Then the family and close friends sit up telling stories and drinking whiskey.

Men who are friends of the family dig the grave the next day and a couple of bottles of whiskey are left at the site with the diggers. Digging a grave is very similar to a bachelor party in one respect. What happens at the gravesite stays at the gravesite!

Funeral arrangements will be made with the priest and they usually include readings, offertory procession and prayers of the faithful. The priest will once again say the Rosary. Friends and local shops will often leave hot food at the wake house; no cooking is done during that time.

The second night after the burial is the more lively of the two nights. Any children who are related to the deceased are sent home or to someone else's house. Close

friends and most of the family stay up the whole night. This is when the drinking, the stories and the celebration really gets going.

The laughing and joking at an Irish Wake can seem odd and even disrespectful to many people. What people need to realize is that during the wake the family has cried their eyes out, they need a release and it's what the deceased would want.

Wakes can be a tense affair; you would have had all sorts of family, friends and odd characters under one roof. But because of the dignity that an Irish Wake is held in, to cause a disagreement or have harsh words with someone would be a serious mistake. The dignity and tradition of Irish wakes make good behavior almost holy.

Many components of the Irish Wake are a throwback to a pagan past and like much of the Catholic tradition in Ireland the Church has tried to include what they want and to remove what they dislike. The Church has attempted numerous times throughout its history to abolish the consumption of alcohol at wakes, but has not been successful.

The eleventh chapter of John is important because it serves as a bridge between chapters 1-10, which are called the “Book of Signs,” describing the miracles that Jesus performed, and the last part of John called the “Book of Glory,” the story of his death and resurrection. It is also the last of the seven signs of Jesus in the book of John. This seventh sign is called the “sign of life.”

Jesus had various places to stay wherever he went. The sisters, Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus, were friends who let Jesus stay with them when he came through Bethany. Jesus took on human flesh; but he also took on human relationships. Mary, Martha and Lazarus did not travel with Jesus, but were probably considered “disciples” in the larger sense. Some scholars suggest that Lazarus could have been the “beloved disciple” that Jesus first talks about in John 13.

A message comes to Jesus from the sisters saying that Lazarus is ill. It is uncertain why Jesus delayed leaving after learning of the illness. It may have been that it was Jesus’ sense of timing. His hour and his relationship to God govern his actions, not human timelines and expectations. After Lazarus’ death Jesus goes to the house of his friends and he responds in human fashion to the grief that he sees. Verse 33, “...*he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved,*” seems to suggest Jesus’ deep compassion. But the Greek verbs used in this verse convey agitation and indignation. Then verse 35

says, “*Jesus began to weep.*” How very much like our own grieving. Jesus assaults the unfairness of death and cries with each of us as we weep at the grave of a loved one. He was angry at death, angry at the decay and angry at the pain that intrudes on God’s gift of life.

Jesus’ conversation with Martha sounds like a typical conversation with a faithful church-goer. Martha’s words are like an ancient ritualistic statement. She seems to be placing her faith out in some end-of-time fog. She says, “*I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.*” Martha does not really expect God to do anything now. For her the promises of God exist in some unrealized future.

The wake-up call in this passage is the awareness that not even Jesus’ closest friends really expect anything at the tomb. Maybe he will offer some wise words of comfort, a nice eulogy perhaps. Sometimes we do not expect God to act in our lives. We expect God to act only in the realm of our spirit, to be active in the afterlife, but not with us in the flesh.

Jesus says to Martha, “*I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.*”

Jesus stuns the crowd with the news that the life he offers is not just for the future; it begins now. He has come to make this life abundant and to give us everlasting life. Martha is not wrong. There is the promise of the future. But there is also a real promise for the here and now.

The resuscitation of Lazarus does not just foreshadow Easter; it is part of the Easter message itself. Lazarus became the walking, talking example of Jesus power.

Resurrection life begins here in this life before it continues into the life to come. Not all of God’s promises are delayed, and God has an active interest in what happens to our earthly bodies as well as to our heavenly souls.

Jesus calls out, “*Lazarus, come out!*” God, through Jesus, has sole responsibility for the resuscitation of Lazarus. Jesus calls, and Lazarus responds by coming out the tomb. The people at the grave face the reality of death when Lazarus comes out of the cave still wrapped in burial clothes. Then Jesus says to the people, “*Unbind him, and let him go.*” Jesus does not let the people remain mere spectators. The people at the

gravesite have a role to play before Lazarus can return. They have to take off the burial clothes that bind him and the head cloth that blinds him. They remove these barriers to his sight and his movement.

Lazarus was a walking, talking example of Jesus power. But he was only resuscitated; he came back to life only to die again at a later time. Listen to how the priests react in chapter 12 to this miracle: *“So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death...since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.”*

Jesus says to us:

*“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”*

This past week I was in St. Louis. My mother had hip replacement surgery on Tuesday. The operation was a success and for a lady of 83 all her vital signs were good. Thursday evening she suffered what the doctors and nurses thought was a stroke. We were at my folk's house eating dinner when we got the call from the hospital. My dad left without finishing his dinner. My brother and I put things away and followed about ten minutes later. When we got to her room, we were told to go to the ICU. We found my dad in the waiting room. He didn't look good. He said that when he got to her room there were six nurses working on her. He tried to talk to her and got no response, so he put his face right up in her face and started talking to her, calling to her. Still there was no response. Then they took her for an MRI. My dad said that he wasn't sure that my mom would come back to him.

After an hour they brought her to the ICU. She was still unresponsive. The doctor who was on duty finally came by and talked to us. She said that they had seen something in the brain, but couldn't tell if it was a stroke or not. If it had been a stroke they weren't sure when it happened.

While we were in her room I went over to my mom, put my hand on her head and tried to pray. I can usually pray for people, but Thursday night I realized that I don't know how to pray for my parents. All I could say over and over was God. In my stumbling prayer what I heard was Jesus' words, *“I am the resurrection and the life.*

*Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.*” I realized that the words were not about me, but they were words for me about my mom. Mom believes, maybe even more than I believe. At that moment I realized that someday she will die. When that happens I will be angry; angry at death, angry at the decay and angry at the pain that intrudes on God’s gift of life. And I will weep, because this is the woman who gave me life; the life that I have passed on to my daughter and she is passing on to her son, my grandson.

In the light of the resurrection, what role does the church play? What do we say when we stand and speak between failed hearts and impatient tombs? What are the grave clothes that we must help remove? We cannot accomplish resurrection, but we can facilitate resurrection life. Listen again to what Jesus said, *“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”*

John 11: 1-44

*When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’ She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.’*