

THE RIDDLE

The riddle Jesus gave to Martha as she grieved the death of her brother Lazarus has given me many delightful hours of pondering. As recorded in John 11:25, 26 Jesus said to her, *"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

Does a believer die or not? Jesus seems to say both are true, although it is clear that the emphasis is on life. Obviously the answer is that both the physical and spiritual realms are being referenced here. We are more than bodies; rather, we live in bodies and at some point we – the essence of who we are – will leave our bodies to continue living on a higher plane. On earth this process of separation is called death; God's point of view, stated by Jesus, is that the believer did not die at all.

Years ago I read a story that delightfully illustrates this teaching. Wanting to credit the author, to whom I am deeply indebted, I have tried but failed to locate the source of the story. In it the author pictures himself running with Death close behind. The race continues with Death gaining ground. Just as Death makes a final lunge, the author slips away, soars upward and joyfully says, "Ha! You missed!" Death, in defeat, is left holding an empty shell.

My heart thrills with every retelling of that story. And then four years ago, I saw it illustrated personally. My father, then 92, was in a nursing home nearing death when I arrived at his bedside. His breathing was labored and his eyes were closed. There were no signs of recognition. As I stroked his brow, I spoke softly to him, assuring him that I was there and that I loved him. His breathing became more peaceful, so I told him I was going to leave for a few minutes to see Mother in her room and would soon be back.

I barely had time to greet my mother when a knock came on the door. It was a nurse bearing the news that Dad had died. "May I see him?" I asked. The nurse and I went down the hall and I was allowed to go alone behind the closed curtain where the body lay. What a sight I saw! That was not my Dad! His body was so empty, not at all attractive, very different from the way it had looked a few minutes earlier. Dad was clearly gone. There was no one to talk to, no reason to stay behind the curtain. To the nurses, surprised at how quickly I returned to them, I said, "Dad's not there. He's happy and well in Heaven. I have no need to be with his body any longer." Dad had died in the earthly sense, that is, he had been separated from his body, but in the spiritual sense, he did not die. Rather, he moved on to a different realm where he was more alive than ever.

And that, I believe, is the answer to the riddle Jesus gave to Martha. She answered his question by stating that she did believe what he said – and so do I. One day I, too, will slip out of the hands of Death and go to be with Jesus and all the members of God's faith family who have gone on before. That sounds like an adventure to me!

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:55-57).

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Shortly after I wrote this meditation, a poem came to my mind that shows what I believe about the separation between body and soul. Here it is:

BODY AND SOUL

Sometime my body will be placed away
Awaiting the great Resurrection Day.

Meanwhile I shall be complete
Sitting at my Savior's feet
Happy with those who have gone before
To be sharing a space on Heaven's floor
With plenty of room for more!

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