

Seeing Beyond

Reflections on art and Christian faith

The Raising of Lazarus John Reilly



Ripolin enamel on board, 1962

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This is a rather an unusual setting for the raising of Lazarus: not 1st century Palestine with a tomb blocked by a large stone, but an English churchyard filled with tomb stones and graves which hover around like little ghosts. But, actually, that seems almost incidental and irrelevant. What this painting is really about is movement. On the left are Martha and Thomas looking on, but shown twice over: once bowed down in grief and once standing up in astonishment at what they are seeing. Two separate snapshots shown in one. The story moves on and unfolds in the painting as we stand still.

In the centre is Lazarus. We can positively see him being flung out of the open grave, as if by some external force. And as soon as he has been lifted up, it looks like he is being drawn into the orbit of that setting sun.

And that is where the real movement is. When you stand in front of this painting, it draws you in, almost making you dizzy, opening up a new, third dimension, the sun at its centre. The vortex around it is reminiscent of long exposures of the night sky. A painting that won't stand still, a painting where time moves on.

What is that sun? What is that new dimension? What is it that Lazarus is being drawn into? Lazarus, one of Jesus's closest friends, one of those who see Jesus for who he is: the light and life and love of God. Lazarus, one of those who will go on to live in the reality of that other story of going from death to life which is still to come: not a mere raising and return to normal earthly life, but a transformation into a completely new life in God. That is what the sun is: new life in the resurrected Spirit of Jesus. A new life which will open up new dimensions, new richness within our own being and in our relationships with others. A life which is all consuming, but will bring us closer to the heart and being of God.

The only person who is completely still in this painting is Jesus. Solidly he stands there, on the edge of the vortex, inviting us in, his hands outstretched nearly as if he is asking us "So, are you going to come? Will you enter this new dimension, this new life that I have opened up for you? Will you embark on the journey that Lazarus is about to embark on? Will you stop standing still, stop being an onlooker and join the movement, the life of this painting, a life with and in God? The invitation is there."

Not shown are the other bystanders. Those who don't see the truth of God reflected in Jesus, even when he raises a man who has been well and truly dead for four days. They are the ones who will not be convinced by anything, who are blind to the sun, who prefer to stand still and remain in their two-dimensional life. The ones who set off to have Jesus crucified.

Will you remain an observer, an onlooker? Or will you dive in and let yourself be swept up in that vortex, that new life in God?

Biblical References

The raising of Lazarus ([John 11:1-53](#))

Jesus' resurrection ([Matthew 28:1-10](#), [Mark 16:1-13](#), [Luke 24:1-49](#), [John 20:1-21:14](#))

Parable of the rich man and Lazarus ([Luke 16:19-31](#))