

## *“Loose Him, and Let Him Go”*

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**A**loha. It is a blessing and privilege to greet you today from your sister campus, BYU—Hawaii, which is guided by the same prophetic destiny as this campus. As you may know, we are a small, intimate campus made up of students of many nations. My greeting could easily come to you in scores of different languages, but aloha, meaning love and affection in the Hawaiian language, has become our universal expression of love, for hello and good-bye.

One of the most significant episodes in our Savior’s mortal ministry was the literal raising of Lazarus from the dead after he had lain in the tomb for four days. The setting for this dramatic manifestation of Christ’s power and love is carefully laid out in John 11. The Apostle’s skillful use of detail, his sense for drama, dialogue, suspense, crescendo, and climax match the doctrinal importance of this event. It is an astounding public miracle that illuminates the core truths about Christ and His Atonement.

You know the story. Christ receives desperate word from Martha and Mary to come to Bethany, for their brother is deathly ill. Jesus deliberately delays His journey for two days, then announces that Lazarus is dead and that He and His disciples must go to him. The disciples remind Him of the hostility of the Jewish leaders toward

Him, even unto His death. Thomas simply says, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (v. 16).

When Christ arrives in Bethany, Martha greets Him with weeping and a gentle rebuke: “Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died” (v. 21). Martha’s complaint is followed by her fervent testimony: “But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee” (v. 22). Jesus affirms His own role and identity: “I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live” (v. 25).

The setting includes Lazarus, his sisters, the disciples, and other Jews. Some are believing. Some are critical. The intense grieving of the sisters, the wailing of the mourners, Christ’s own tears, the anticipation of His death, the disciples’ fear of the Jewish leaders, the hostility of certain ones in the crowd, and the melancholy of the grave site—all of these constitute for us a crescendo of profound human emotion. Jesus commands that the stone covering the tomb’s entrance be removed. Martha objects, saying, “Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath

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*Eric B. Shumway was the president of BYU—Hawaii when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 26 March 2002.*

been dead four days” (v. 39). Christ says, “If thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God” (v. 40).

The stone is removed. Jesus offers a prayer of gratitude that reveals He had asked permission from His Father to stage this miraculous representation of the Atonement for the purpose of comforting wounded and grieving hearts, of testifying of His love and power, and of convincing the people present to believe the Father had sent Him (see v. 42).

The climactic moment comes when Christ cries out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth” (v. 43). Can you imagine that combination of hope, terror, and surprise the people feel when Lazarus obeys the command and rises, “bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin” (v. 44)? The sight and smell of this dead man must have been more than some could bear. But then came Christ’s second command to certain others standing by: “Loose him, and let him go” (v. 44).

Think of it. Christ was commanding the people to free Lazarus, to remove the graveclothes and unbind the wrappings from around his eyes, mouth, hands, and feet—the wrappings of the grave. For he lived again! Think of the joy! But can we imagine also the hesitancy of some to reach out and remove the graveclothes? No doubt some shrank away completely.

For me the Lazarus story provides one of the most powerful metaphors of the Atonement of Christ for all humankind. We are all like Lazarus, beloved of the Lord, but wrapped about in the graveclothes of this world.

The Atonement is the central reality of our existence. It is the comprehensive instrument of hope, justice, and mercy in the world. In a significant way the Atonement will account for, reconcile, and redeem every injustice perpetrated in the history of this planet—all suffering, cruelty, guilt, violence against innocent and defenseless people, all accidents and

ironies. It is the principle and the mechanism through which the work and glory of God can be accomplished; namely, “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life” of mankind (Moses 1:39).

Although the story of Lazarus made a powerful impression on me early in life, it wasn’t until I came to BYU as an English literature major and later as a teacher that I was deeply moved by the essence of this story. Interestingly enough, it was not in a religion class—although religion classes were always inspiring. It was a literature class in which we studied Feodor Dostoevsky’s classic novel *Crime and Punishment*.

This novel contains for me one of the profound religious moments in all literature. It is that haunting scene in which Sonya the harlot and Raskolnikov the murderer sit in the waning candlelight of Sonya’s apartment and read the story of Lazarus from the Bible.

In the novel, Raskolnikov is assailed by poverty and an eroding self-centeredness that has led him to a belief in man-made reason and will-controlled morality. Sonya is tortured by a life completely alien to her moral sensibilities. Raskolnikov is feelingless. Sonya is all love. Raskolnikov claims he murdered an old Jewish pawnbroker to prove that he, like Napoleon, was above traditional morality and could justifiably remove any obstacle that blocked his path to power. Sonya—crushed by poverty, exhausted by a drunken father and a neurotic stepmother, and terrorized by the thought of starving brothers and sisters—has become a prostitute to support the family.

In this particular scene Raskolnikov sneers that her self-sacrifice is in vain, since she will, no doubt, die of infection; the stepmother will eventually die of tuberculosis; and the children will die of starvation. Sonya is impaled on the barbs of his cynicism. He renders the unkindest cut of all when he predicts that Sonya’s little sister Polechka will also have to walk the streets simply to prolong the agony of life:

"No! No! That can't be! No!" Sonya almost shrieked in desperation, as if someone had plunged a knife into her. "God—God will not allow such a terrible thing! . . ."

"He lets it happen to others," [responded Raskolnikov].

"No, no! God will protect her! God will protect her!" she repeated, beside herself.

"Perhaps God does not exist," answered Raskolnikov, with malicious enjoyment. He looked at her and laughed. [Feodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Jessie Coulson (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 271]

Moments later Raskolnikov suggests suicide to be better for Sonya than living a life so loathsome to her. Sonya's answer is simple: "But what will become of [the children]?" (Dostoevsky, *Crime*, 272). Raskolnikov is stunned into silence. The light of Sonya's love shines in the darkness of his mind. He can't comprehend it. He decides it must be religious fanaticism, a mad hope that a miracle will happen. He is determined to tear that delusion from Sonya's heart:

"So you pray a great deal to God, Sonya?" he asked her. . . .

"What should I do without God?" she said in a rapid, forceful whisper. . . .

"And what does God do for you in return?" he asked, probing deeper. . . .

. . . Her . . . little chest heaved with agitation.

"Be quiet! Do not ask! You are not worthy!" . . .

"He does everything." [Dostoevsky, *Crime*, 273–74]

In a final malicious whim, Raskolnikov insists that Sonya read the story of Lazarus. And so, in this setting, with the plagues, wretchedness, cruelty, and stench of St. Petersburg engulfing them, Sonya reads the sacred words:

"I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:

"And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. . . ."

"And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth.

"And he that was dead came forth . . . bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go." [Dostoevsky, *Crime*, 276–77]

Here is the moment of vision in the novel. It marks the beginning of Raskolnikov's regeneration, and it affirms and validates Sonya's hope. But it is much more than the pivotal moment in the lives of two imaginary persons. It is a moment for all time, for all men and women. It is the voice of God speaking out of the human predicament, not merely out of a holy text. (For a more extensive analysis, see Eric B. Shumway, "Literature as Religious Experience," in *From This Place: Lectures in Honor of David O. McKay: Delivered Annually at Brigham Young University—Hawaii Campus, 1963–1992*, comps. Jesse S. Crisler and Jay Fox [Laie, Hawaii: Brigham Young University—Hawaii, 1998], 163–79.)

These two commandments to "come forth" and to "loose him, and let him go" constitute the way and the power of the Atonement. Let me illustrate further from the lives of two of BYU—Hawaii's international students.

Theany Reath from Cambodia was forced as a child to witness the massacres of her people. Terrified and traumatized by this horror of torture and genocide, she burned incense nightly to her favorite Buddhist god. When peace finally came to her country and the LDS missionaries arrived, she was attracted to the Church. But she was warned by friends and family not to join this foreign cult or she would be damned in the deepest hell or reincarnated into the most loathsome creature on earth.

Wrapped about by fear, she trembled at the admonition of the missionaries to pray. She was conditioned to believe in many gods and many

demons both mysterious and terrible. How could she approach the god of the missionaries? How could she obey the admonition to “come forth,” as it were?

Theany described her first attempt to address deity—not in the language of prayer that the missionaries had taught her but in the only language she could muster. Her prayer was simply a question: “Are . . . you the god of all the gods?” As she has testified, in that moment she was engulfed with profound feelings of warmth and love—deep and personal sensations of a loving Heavenly Father. Her surprise was exceeded only by her joy. She had “come forth,” and Heavenly Father had freed her from the graveclothes of every present fear and insecurity and from the visions of horror from her past. Theany later served in the Sacramento California Mission and is now studying on our campus.

Katsuhiko Kajiyama was among the first students who came from Japan. Now a professor of Japanese on our campus, he reminisced about his rescue, Lazarus-like, from soul death. His tomb was a dark hopelessness; his graveclothes a bitter cynicism and hatred toward Americans. As he said in the account he sent to me: “I lived numbly, desensitized, and cold.”

He remembered as a child the joy of his family, his prayers to the Buddha and Kami. But especially he remembered his mother—beautiful, soft, kind, gentle. His home was a place of peace. Their hometown was Hiroshima. On the morning of August 6, 1945, Kats was playing with a friend at school. He was just seven years old. These are his words:

*The loud air raid alarm pierced our ears. . . . As I crouched down to the edge of the front door, an extraordinarily bright flash of light exploded as if a thousand flash photos had been taken, the light enveloping the whole building and sky. . . . There was a thunderous blast and a gust of force so strong that it shook the entire building and ground. . . . I screamed. . . . All around me there were noises*

*of things being crushed and of shattered glass cascading to the floor.*

Kats described the panic that ensued. Covered with blood, he escaped from under heavy fallen doors and ran out into a world surreal in its horror: houses on fire, whirling dust and smoke, hysterical crying and screaming from every direction. “Floating, groping along in the chaos,” he had visions of his beautiful mother waiting for him at home. He longed for her comfort, her soft, gentle touch. However, when he arrived at the spot, he said:

*I [encountered] a strange woman in baked, dirty clothes with a grotesquely swollen face and burnt, short, kinky hair. . . . Severe burns disfigured my beautiful mother into a stranger of bloated face with red and dark-brown blotches and scratches. I looked on in disbelief as her sweet voice called my name, “Kacchan.” I cried for relief that it was she, but also [in terror for her dreadful look].*

It took 20 agonizing days for his mother to finally die. His brother was never found, except for the remnant of a sock with his name written on it with a black marker.

Motherless and reduced to abject poverty, Kats was tormented by the images of the pain and death of his mother and brother. He longed to hear “the sweet, gentle call” of his mother. “It seemed that [he] would never find peace in this cruel and harsh existence,” until one day an American named Elder Gary Roper spoke to him: “How is school? Do you live nearby? I see you often in the streetcar. Would you like to join an activity for young people?”

Kats said he was amazed by this American’s indescribably tender smile.

*I was unfamiliar with this type of gentleness from foreigners. . . . Until then I had [believed] all Americans were heartless monsters who willingly sought to hurt and degrade the Japanese people.*

After Elder Roper, it was Elder Green. One year had passed since his first introduction to the Church. He was still reluctant to join, but at a district conference in Hiroshima, the voice of Christ from the mouth of mission president Paul C. Andrus commanded, "'Come forth.' Be baptized."

In contrast to the horrific flash of light in the atomic bomb blast, Kats wrote of his baptism:

*At that moment . . . I felt as though the brightest sun had broken through the clouds and streamed through the building. The whole auditorium seemed to be brightly lit and glowing. I was . . . filled with incomprehensible happiness and joy.*

You can guess the rest of the story. The graveclothes of his tortured past were now unwrapped. The cynicism, hatred, and bitterness were gone. Kats was called on a mission to his native Japan. As a missionary he helped teach and baptize 80 people.

After his mission, thanks to generous donors and a work-study scholarship program, he went to BYU—Hawaii, which was then the Church College of Hawaii. He married his wife, Hilda, in the temple. He had further schooling, coming to the Provo campus to finish his bachelor's degree and to complete his master's degree in art. The graveclothes of ignorance and prejudice were further removed. He and his wife have raised a family of brilliant, devoted children. Both their daughters are now embarking on missions for the Church—one to Japan and one to Hong Kong.

Nearly every true conversion or repentance sequence is an analogue of the story of Lazarus.

One interesting question is: What if Lazarus, exercising his agency even as a spirit, had decided he did not want to return to a decaying, tortured body? He might prefer to let dead bodies lie. Or what if those present were squeamishly reluctant to touch the death wrappings of a man who clearly had been dead? It is not difficult to identify parallels among us

today: people who would not be inclined to obey either commandment. Obedience to both commandments is central to the restoration of life.

Sometimes the wrappings of death are manifest in the clothes of addiction and behavioral patterns that paralyze righteous thought and action, such as alcoholism, gambling, drug use, pornography, anger, and violence. These wrappings are made of coarse cloth and smell of hell, and they bind people in a tomb of hopeless illusion and despair.

But what about the death wrappings of a finer texture: the silken wrappings of pride and self-importance, of obsession with one's appearance, of wealth devoid of any generous impulse? Many of these finer-textured addictions are mutations of things that satisfy basic needs; for example, the need we all have for encouragement morphing into a desperate search for praise and flattery. A dependency on "praise from above and flattery from below" has doomed more than one rising leader in nearly every profession (Stanley M. Herman, *The Tao at Work: On Leading and Following* [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994], 40).

The acts of helping to remove someone's "graveclothes," as it were, are the essence of a Latter-day Saint's errand from the Lord. You may ask yourself, "Am I an unbinder or am I a binder? Do I help loose or remove the graveclothes of others, or do I wrap their graveclothes more tightly around them?"

We all know people who have magnificent public or pulpit personas who may teach tearfully the doctrines that unbind and heal but who in their private lives are binders, who by their selfish prejudices, labels, and stereotypes bind others more tightly in their graveclothes.

Alma the Elder was in effect bound in heavy graveclothes. The act that unbound him was his willingness to listen to a prophet (see Mosiah 17). Abinadi gave his life to unbind Alma. In turn, Alma the Elder was an unbinder for his son, Alma the Younger, for whom all he could do

was sincerely pray (see Mosiah 27:14). Prayer is part of the great unbinding process. Enos also found that out in his all-day-long prayer (see Enos 1).

Elder M. Russell Ballard is one of the great unbinders in the Church today—not just in his pulpit sermons and priesthood leadership training but also in his personal ministry, largely unseen by the general public. In the second month of my service as mission president in Tonga, Elder Ballard conducted two stake conferences on the same Sunday on the island of Vava`u. After a long, glorious day of meetings and training, we all returned to the hotel exhausted. I was in my pajamas ready for bed at 9:30 when a knock came at the door. It was my counselor, saying Elder Ballard wanted me to come to the restaurant immediately. I dressed hastily and went to the grill and found Elder Ballard talking to a man.

“President Shumway, this is John. He is leaving first thing in the morning on his yacht, but he wants to hear about the gospel. I told him he was in luck because a duly authorized servant of God was in the hotel who could teach him. Could you find a room where you can teach him and pray together?”

Brothers and sisters, I do remember the teaching and praying with this man, but I will never forget the example of an Apostle who, though exhausted, could still ask a golden question and put someone in touch with a missionary who could help begin the process of unbinding.

The great unbinders in the Church are our bishops. Many people stay in their graveclothes because they don’t go to their bishops. Sometimes they desperately need to “come forth” from their own little tomb to confess.

Sometimes they just have concerns, but fear that by coming to a bishop they will be seen as somehow less valiant. Sometimes they don’t need to confess as much as they need to give voice to their feelings, ask questions, be reassured, ventilate, and feel love from a Church leader.

Sister Shumway belongs to that vast army of unbinders in the Church whom we call Relief Society visiting teachers. For 10 years she has been a visiting teacher to a woman who never once came to Church. During one visiting teaching session, Carolyn asked her if she ever read the *Ensign* magazine that she had sent her every month.

“No,” she said, pointing upward, “but I know Father in Heaven is there because you keep coming back and you do not judge me.”

This lady’s graveclothes are being loosened. Her son did become active and is now serving a mission in the Philippines.

I pray that the story of Lazarus will take root more deeply in all of us; that the power of the Atonement in Lazarus, Sonya, Raskolnikov, Theany Reath, and Kats Kajiyama and millions of others will give us courage to “stand forth” and to allow our graveclothes to be removed; and that we might also be both the healers and the healed, the unbinders and the unbound.

With all my heart I testify of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, the reality of His existence, the blessedness of the Restoration, and the blessed opportunity that you and I have to be associated with Brigham Young University. We are all called to be healers and unbinders. Faculty and students are healers and unbinders, but we all must be the healed and unbound as well, through Jesus Christ. I say this in His name, amen.