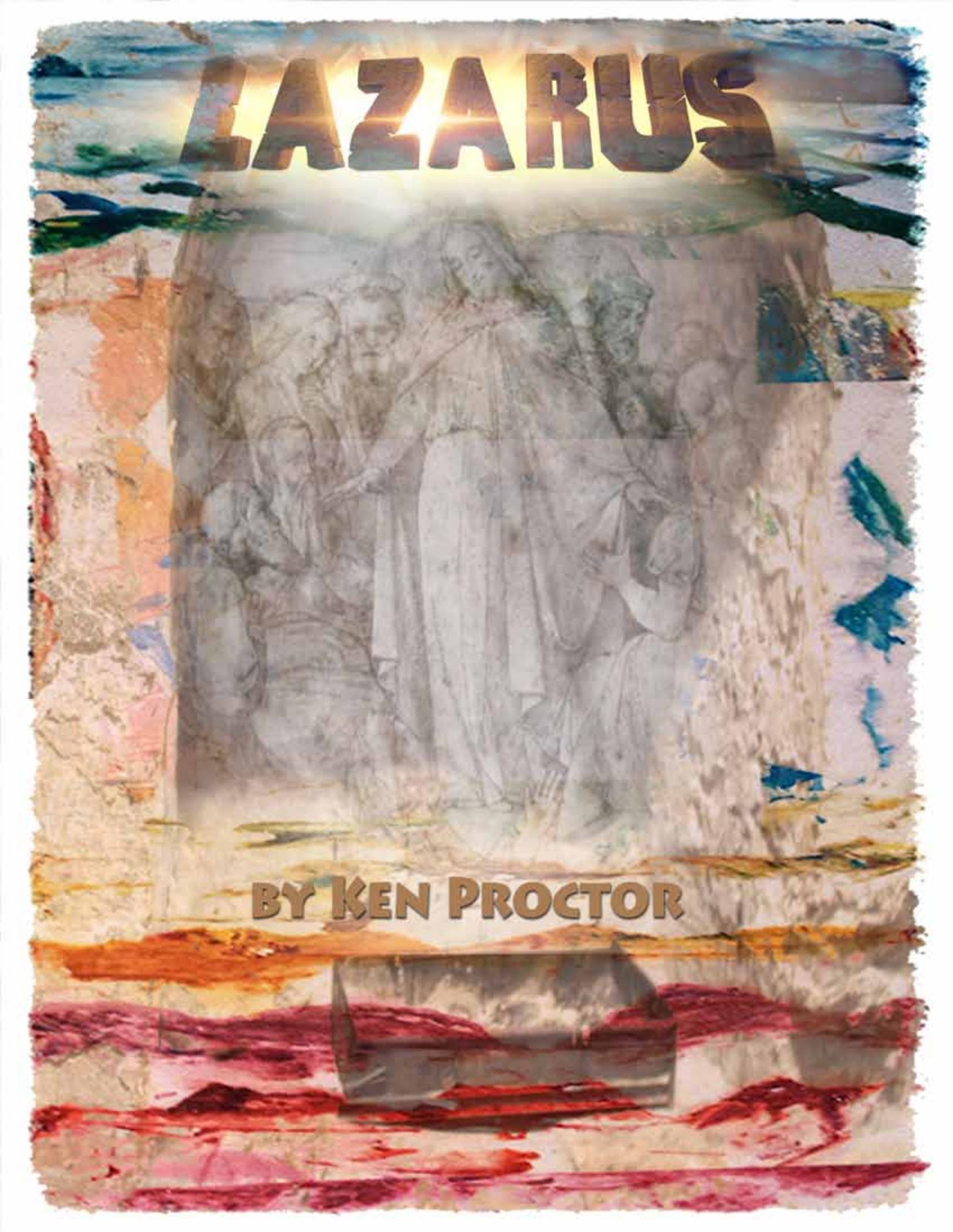


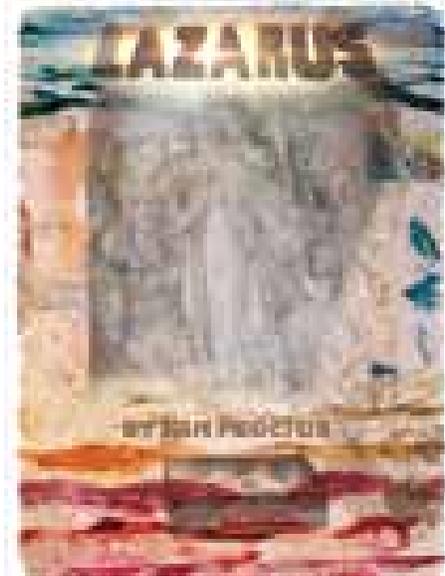
LAZARUS



BY KEN PROCTOR

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Published by SpiritDrivenLeadership.com



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Lazarus

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So easy.

It was so easy. So smooth.

Dropping upward... like slipping from a limp grasp, from a lifeless hand, and falling... upward. Escaping a tight restricting husk. Metamorphosis. Sweet release and complete relief.

Drifting upward. Ever upward.

Why had I clung so tenaciously to that mortal husk? Why? Was it so dear, so precious? The smell of fear was on it like stale sweat. The husk felt pain. The husk was fragile. So dirty. And weak.

And now the husk was dead. It just lay there. Still and crumpled. Defeated. Deflated. Already the corruption of the flesh that had slowly killed it worked to eventually consume it. As the fluids stagnated and congealed, the solids collapsed in upon the hollow core. Hollow now. Empty.

But what did I care? The husk lay behind me. The sky wide open before me. Or was it the sky? It was space... or spacious. It had space. It was real... but not terrestrial. I recognized sounds, voices singing... myriad voices raised in praise. The music gave the space both substance and scope. A symphony of voices audible and clear, but not loud or overpowering.

And there were people... well, beings. Some I'm sure had been here all along. Others, like myself, relatively new, passing from one reality to the next. That reality to this one. A new reality... at least new to me. This place, this space, was real, and always had been. Ancient without being old. Timeless but new every morning.

Mourning? Yes, there had been mourning. Even before escaping the husk, there had been mourning... and fear, and grief.. But it had been other's fear. And other's grief. Too sick and too tired, I hadn't had the energy for either. A small hope had remained for rescue, but my larger hope had been for an end. Preferably a quick end. An end to the painful sores, the debilitating nausea, the fatigue, the fever, the stench. To be released from that failing and festering carcass, from that noxious bedding in that malodorous room. And from the mourning.

Release, therefore, became the greater hope. Release and relief. To die. To pass from that realm to the next, trusting in the grace and goodness of the next realm's Sovereign. Grace, acceptance and forgiveness. And new life, resurrection to a new life in His Kingdom. In these I trust. Not trusting to my own understanding, or relying on my own wisdom, works or worth. Men measure men by these standards, setting men in the balances, the scales, and weighing each other against

these capricious merits. On such a sliding scale do souls slip away.

My lesser hope, rescue, had not come. But though a faint hope, it had been a real hope. The assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen. Faith in a dear friend. Faith that that friend had the means to rescue me, to draw out the infection, to relieve the pain, close the sores, expunge the puss, reduce the inflammation. The ability to end the fear, the sorrow... the mourning.

But the friend had not come... at least, not in time.

Now time had lost its relevance. Lost its importance. And so had lost its power. In this new place, this new reality, time existed, but being endless, time was endlessly abundant. No longer the short commodity, time became a wall flower... present, but unnoticed. Timid and toothless. So also, waiting had lost its sinister sister, worrying. Waiting was just... waiting.

And we were... waiting. Indeed this was a place of waiting. Yes, there was music, heralds praising the Father, cherubs crying out endless words of praise and adoration, messengers coming and going on errands or missions. There appeared no end to the activity, yet over all, like thin frosting, the waiting. Like waiting for the birth of a child, knowing that it will eventually come, but not knowing when.

"Soon," one of the beings says. "Very soon." And with the others, I wait. The anticipation slowly building, slowly rising, generation after generation as dynasty follows dynasty, kingdom follows kingdom. The Promised Son is coming back, the Heir coming before His Father's throne. "Soon. And very soon," the voice repeats.

But another voice is heard in this place. A commanding voice. A familiar voice. And at His voice all the beings about me rise up and cheer. Surely now the time has come for the... but all of the beings have turned to look at me.

"Lazarus," the voice calls again. That familiar voice. Calmly commanding. Gently but firmly demanding. "Lazarus." It is my name. My name. He is speaking to me. Calling to me. Demanding my attention.

"Yes, Lord," I answer, dropping to my knees as the others draw back from me in expectation. Suddenly, I don't feel so good. This can't be what we had been waiting for. What all my new acquaintances had been waiting for. For so long.

"Tell Him, we are waiting," someone behind me whispers. "When you see Him, tell Him we love Him."

"Lazarus," I hear as if from afar. Clear but distant. "Come forth."

I can't breath! Can't breath! Rolling onto my side, I claw at my face to clear an airway, but my hands and fingers are enmeshed, tightly bound by linen wraps. An index finger breaks free and I hook the heavy folds of fabric that bind my mouth, dragging them below my chin. My mouth flies open to suck air into stagnant lungs. I choke and gag on the rank air, suffused by both the corruption and putrefaction of death and the heavy, overpowering spices and aromatics employed to mask them. This air is nearly unbreathable.

Panic grips me, clutching at my already constricted chest. "I know where I am," my mind screams. "I know where I am. This is my family's tomb. I played here in this small cave as a child, in the years before it's entrance was walled off leaving a low doorway. Before it was employed to entomb the dead. Was I buried alive, then? Surely not! But I am alive. I... am... alive!"

Struggling to my knees, my shrouded eyes sense light off to my right. Turning toward the light, my bound hands press me up from the packed earth that had been used to level the floor of the cave. Getting my feet under me I rise up only to strike my head against the low stone ceiling. Staggering blindly forward in the near dark, one hand on my head and the other before me, I lurch toward the low entryway. There is no stone over the entry. No stone blocks my way. Ducking as best I can I escape death's womb, plunging, new born, into the light and the fresh air of a new day... in my old reality.

I am alive... but I am not sure I want to be.

"Unbind him." Even through the swaddling wraps about my head, I recognize that voice and instinctively try to face it's owner.

"And let him go." Were my own arms and legs not so tightly bound, I would have leapt to do His bidding. Had my face and eyes been uncovered, surely I would have scanned the surrounding crowd for some poor soul to unfetter. For His smallest suggestion is as a request, and His request is to me a command. And to disregard His command... unthinkable.

There were shouts of wonder mixed with tears of joy as I straightened and took a halting step away from the stone face of the tomb. Tentative hands plucked at the gore encrusted shrouds that encased me, but my sisters were less reserved. As Martha tore the fabric to free my face, Mary wrapped me in a crushing embrace, fouling her own clothing with the essence and stench of my death while rejoicing in my restored life. I crumple into their arms, faint with relief... or is it hunger. My stomach has come back to life, too, and for the first time in weeks I have an appetite.

Body and soul I have been restored. By my friend. Restored to my home. Restored to my sisters. Restored as head of their household, their primary source of income and security. And He who was once my friend, is surely now my Lord. Many of our neighbors and relatives, who had come either to grieve my passing or to comfort the living, also believe... for who but the Lord Himself could have done this thing. When He called me I came. Where He leads me I will follow.

Indeed, had He not called me specifically by name before instructing me to “come forth,” surely all those waiting with me would have come at His bidding. Leaving behind the robe of peace and the raiment of joy that cloaked them in that place of waiting, to don again the trappings of their long forsaken graves, shrug off the dusty slumber, take on their former flesh and stagger into the light.

But He did... call me. Only me... this time. But I know, now for a certainty, that a day will come when all the world will hear that voice and the earth shudder and surrender the dead. And it will be a judgment day.

I no longer fear death. Dying, yes. I fear dying... again. I weep to think that, having passed that painful gauntlet once, and having found myself safely ensconced in the realm prepared for those who wait on Him, I must taste the bitterness of death yet again. Be a burden to my family again. Be washed, anointed, wrapped, spiced, entombed in that little cave... and mourned... again.

But death I no longer fear. It has lost its sting. It has lost its mystery for me, and I do not fear it. Because I've been dead before. And will be again. We all will... someday. That is how we get from here... to there. And for some the passage will be just that quick. For others, dying will come more slowly, and more painfully.

We are dining together this evening, my Lord and I, as well as as many others as our house will contain. I had to bathe first, of course, before any one could endure my presence. Twice, in fact. The burial fabrics peeled off of me were taken downwind and burned. So, freshly washed and wearing clean clothing, I recline at the table. And we dine together.

And I watch Him. With clear eyes and clear mind, I watch Him. Seeing anew what has always been there: the subtle dichotomy. One moment He listens to the chatter among friends, smiling, a man comfortable and relaxed among men, and women, who have grown to love Him and believe in Him... to a point. The next moment, in the twinkling of an eye, there is something else... someone else, who speaks with the earnest clarity, the firm unshakable authority, and the disturbing, almost frightening, decidedly unsettling conviction of a monarch who defines the law, applies the law, and stands to proclaim judgment.

But then the moment passes... and there sits the man, with a sleeping child in His lap, a cup in his hand and a few stray crumbs in His beard. Like a fine crystal cup wrapped in a worn leather bag. Our God, or rather the Son of our God, wrapped for a time in the body of a man. And that is the dichotomy: is He the leather bag we see, or the precious cup within? I know now that it is both, He is both. One of us... yet, God with us.

As if reading my thoughts, He turns to me and gives the slightest shake of the head. ‘Don’t tell.’ I understand His message. ‘Not yet. There will be a time to reveal what you know, but not today.’ I nod ever so slightly. ‘I understand.’ He turns again to the conversation about Him, knowing I will keep His trust. And the moment passes.

Ever on the move, my Lord travels on and, for a time, I follow. Many have heard rumors of a resurrection, and having seen me and touched me and heard the words of so many witnesses, they too believe. But some believe he is Elijah born again. Others say he must be a new prophet sent by the Father with signs. Yet more proclaim that, at last, the Messiah, God the Son has finally come to rescue his people and will lead a great army to defeat their enemies. But they are all wrong. Peter knows... but he does not fully understand. I suspect that John and James know also, but they, too, fail to comprehend the path that our Lord must walk.

It is not our earthly enemies that He has come to defeat. And there are no armies, no munitions that can conquer the foe. No kings of men, or fathers of nations hold us so captive as our own guilt. No mighty men bind us so surely as our own sin. And no magic spell or silvan sword can free us from the fetters of our own design. A ransom is required. Payment is due. A sacrifice must be made, a surrogate found, to stand in our stead, to take our place. To pay the price. But no coin will do. Death is the sentence, so someone must die.

Word has come to us that the High Priest, Caiaphas himself, has declared that it is expedient that one man should die for the people, that the whole nation not perish. And it is he, with the aid of so many others, who now conspires to make it so, not for the glory of God, or the good of mankind, but for their own purposes. A substantial reward has been offered for information leading to the arrest of one Jesus of Nazareth. They are seeking my friend that they may silence him.

Evidently they are seeking me, too. Perhaps to bury the evidence. But I'm not worried. You see... I've been buried before... and I no longer fear death.