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Faith Today

Brought back to life by a friend

By Monica Clark
NC News Service

I sat in the small auditorium listening to Alexis — a dynamic, well-organized, sensitive woman who is strongly committed to justice and the poor. As she conducted the meeting that day, memories of an earlier conversation with her kept interrupting my notetaking.
"No one in this room knows what a miracle we're witnessing," I thought. Weeks before, Alexis confided to me that she had been raised from the dead.
No, she hadn't returned from an out-of-the-body experience; she hadn't been resuscitated from a catastrophic illness.
She was brought back to a full life through the healing power of friendship.

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After her husband died when she was 42, Alexis couldn't fight off depression. She remembered rejection as a child. She remembered confusion as a young adult. She wept again for the child she'd miscarried and the family she felt she would never have.
"I was dead inside," she said one afternoon. "I ended up in the hospital because I had no energy. They found nothing physically wrong with me so I had to leave."
Waiting for her when she was discharged was a neighbor who helped Alexis emerge from her emotional tomb. The woman took charge of personal details Alexis was too exhausted to perform. She directed Alexis to a counselor and helped her find a job. She continued her words of care and deeds of love as Alexis took her first halting steps, then wider strides and eventually giant leaps to recovery.
"She couldn't take my pain away," Alexis said. "I had to deal with that. But she kept extending her love and that love became the healing force."
How like Lazarus, I thought. He too was brought back to life by the power of love.

Lenten Series
"After a long period of depression, the woman was dead emotionally. But like Lazarus, she was raised by the power of love. Friendship, writes Monica Clark, means letting God work through us to bring new life — a resurrection — to others."

In raising Lazarus from the tomb, Jesus makes us think of the resurrection. But the biblical story also gives us concrete reassurance of God's eternal faithfulness to his friends. And we find a model of what it means to be a friend.

Often it is hard to

Lazarus. Alexis' neighbor came even though her friend was then unable to return kindness.

—Friends enter into each other's pain. Jesus wept for Lazarus and his grieving sisters. Jesus felt the loss. He was

compassionate. Alexis spoke of "our good



remain near when a friend's difficulties produce a "stench" — different from the one Martha warned Jesus about when he came close to the tomb of her brother Lazarus, but unpleasant nonetheless.

Not turning away is an important quality of friendship — love overcomes discomfort. Jesus did not hold back from

cries together" as she unveiled her brokenness to her friend, who replied that her heart felt fractured too.

—A friend respects the mystery of God's unique action in each person's life and does not interfere with the process. Jesus did not hasten to Bethany to save Lazarus, despite family urgings. "If you had been here my

brother would never have died," Martha said.

Alexis had to work through her own despair; her friend couldn't rescue her from those of her struggles that were strictly an "Alexis and God affair."

—Friends offer supportive love that helps the other person grow. In praying for Lazarus' resurrection, Jesus said: I speak for the sake of all those who stand around me so they may believe that you sent me.

Alexis listened to her friend's promptings to pursue whatever actions would restore her to emotional health.

—A friend knows when it is time to let go. John writes that Jesus let Lazarus "go free." Alexis' friend did not try to hold on to her, to protect her, to control her. Rather she rejoiced when Alexis could walk alone again.

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If Jesus were to pose a few questions today, perhaps he would ask:

When you hear a friend is suffering from cancer, do you overcome your fear of not knowing what to say or do, in order not to leave him alone?

When you visit a grieving widow, what words and actions do you use to let her know you want to help absorb her pain?

Do you think about whether your action will support your friend's spiritual and emotional growth?

Do you know how to step away, to give a friend needed freedom? Do you know when it is right to return with highly visible love?

Friendships can evoke the best from us. They require taking risks, surrendering control, enduring pain. Ultimately friendship means trusting that God will work through us to bring life — resurrection — to others.

(Ms. Clark is on the staff of the Catholic Voice in Oakland Calif.)

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