In this early 17C Baroque masterpiece, the Italian Baroque painter Caravaggio dramatically depicted the moment Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. Giovanni Battista de' Lazzari, a rich merchant from Genoa, who considered Lazarus his patron saint, commissioned this massive altarpiece (380 cm/12.5' x 275 cm/9') of oil on canvas for the church of Padri Crociferi in Messina (3). As Caravaggio interpreted this story from the Gospel of John (11.33-44) in the Christian New Testament, Jesus, on the far left clothed in muted red and black, points directly at Lazarus with his right hand -- in the same manner as Jesus singled out a disciple in Caravaggio's earlier The Calling of St. Matthew (2). The observers, modeled on local people in Sicily, watched amazed at Jesus, while a strong man holds the angled nude body and Lazarus' surprised sisters, Martha and Mary, cradle their bother returning to life. As in his other paintings, Caravaggio skillfully applied "tenebrism -- the use of dark shadows to obscure parts of the composition . . . and chiaroscuro, the strong contrast of light and dark" (3) to capture the intensity of Jesus' famous miracle in the crowded lower half of the painting. However, rather than his usual concentration on the suffering, Caravaggio emphasized victory over death, creating "the most visionary picture of his career" (4). This emotionally charged painting reflected the requirements of the Roman Catholic Church's Council of Trent to emphasize spiritual miracles to counter the Protestant Reformation (5).

Sources: