

JESUS RAISES LAZARUS FROM THE DEAD

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Jesus performed many miracles but the raising of Lazarus was his flagship miracle. All His miracles were signs that He is Life and that He's come to give us Life. But no other miracle more closely approaches the reality of the Life he gives us. The physical life Jesus gave Lazarus is still not in the realm of eternal life because Lazarus eventually died again, but it reminds us of the hope we have in Christ for eternal life – not only for ourselves but our loved ones.

"I'm Glad I Wasn't There"

I want us take a closer look at several scenes in the Gospel lesson that precede Jesus raising Lazarus. First, I was troubled by something Jesus said. Mary and Martha sent a message to Jesus as soon as they realized their brother was sick. "Lord, he whom you love is ill." They didn't ask Jesus to come immediately but, I believe, assumed he would. Jesus intentionally delayed for two days and Lazarus died. When Jesus informed his disciples of the death of his friend he added, "I'm glad I wasn't there." That troubles me deeply. "I'm glad I wasn't there." Jesus softens his words by adding, *"For your sake I'm glad I wasn't there, so that you may believe."* But is it possible that Jesus delays showing up as an evangelistic technique – so we may believe? I don't understand loving someone, having the ability to save them from death – and delaying until it's too late.

When Jesus finally arrived Lazarus had been dead four days. Both Martha and Mary reproached Jesus, "Lord, *if you'd been here*, my brother would not have died." They aren't the only ones who have lamented Christ's absence in time of desperate need. The Psalmist prayed, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me?" When

people with so much unsupervised time find it very easy to get in trouble. The Lighthouse Youth Ministry has proven to be a valuable asset to our community. Buzz Tyson directed the Lighthouse Youth Center for the last seven years. Many of us know Buzz. Buzz is that tall guy with a flat top who wears Bermuda shorts all through the winter and has also helped out with our own youth. He worked hard to find ways of filling up the time of street kids with constructive recreation, Christian teaching, and a positive role model. He was and is respected and loved by the Lighthouse kids. So Dale Jones, his successor, has big shoes to fill. Dale told a story about one boy who obviously misses Buzz. The boy said to Dale, "You know, Buzz really loved us."

"What makes you think Buzz loved you guys?"

The young, tough, streetwise kid answered, "Because I was at the Lighthouse once and police came. They arrested a couple of kids for drugs. They took them off to jail. And Buzz cried. That's how I know he loved us."

Jesus began to weep after Lazarus died and before he was raised. Pay attention to his tears. I see in Christ's tears the very heart of God. That's why I believe God loves us. Jesus began to weep and he continues to weep.

*(Weeping) for the aching ones whose wounds cannot be nursed,
For the countless confused, accused, misused, strung-out ones an' worse,
An' for every hung-up person in the whole wide universe (Bob Dylan).*

I see in Christ's tears God's grief for us in that long delay we now experience between Christ's resurrection and that great getting up day in the morning we call the Resurrection on the last day.

Almighty God, your Son came into the world to free us all from sin and death. Breathe upon us with the power of your Spirit, that we may be raised to new life in Christ, and serve you in holiness and righteousness all our days; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

the wife of C.S. Lewis died he was devastated. He who did so much to bring men and women to faith in Christ discovered his own faith shaken to the foundations. He wrote, "Why is (Christ) so present in our time of prosperity and so very absent in time of trouble?"

"Do You Believe This?"

But let's move beyond our perplexity to the response of Jesus. Jesus responds to our reproach with powerful words that we continue to repeat at every funeral. "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. *Do you believe this?*" When the sun of our life stops shining and the stars fall from the sky – will we still trust that God will win in the end? My purpose as a Minister of the Word is to strengthen our faith in Christ as we travel the Way and seek the Truth to eternal Life. But our faith won't be strengthened if we prop it up with a sentimental Pollyannaish attitude that closes our eyes to perplexity. If our faith in Christ is only a cardboard house built of pious cant it won't survive bad weather. Our Gospel lesson for this morning is meant to prepare us for the worst of weather – the death of a young loved one. When a loved one dies at the end of a long life we grieve and accept it. But when a young man or woman like Lazarus dies unexpectedly words can't express our perplexity. Logic fails! Words fail! We preachers are often too hasty in our attempts to take away the pain, ease the suffering of loss, and attempt to explain the inexplicable. But sometimes we just have to throw up our arms and confess, "I don't know." Death is a terrible mystery. What's equally mysterious, however, is how many grieving people manage to keep on trusting and obeying Christ.

Some of you have lost the one who was your North, your South, your East and West (W. H. Auden) and yet are still able to say, "I believe in Jesus Christ Jesus." I believe that the God who knit us together with flesh and sinews in our mother's womb can put flesh back on the dry

bones of our lives. At the beginning of our lives God breathed life into our nostrils and even now sustains the regular pumping of our heart as we sit here. I believe God can also breathe a life-giving Spirit back into our existence. Just as God causes new flesh to grow over the painfully scuffed and bleeding knees of our children when they fall in the playground, I believe God will put flesh back on the dry bones of our lives (Achte-meier). I believe in the Sun even when it is not shining. I believe in love even when I don't feel it. I believe in Christ even when he doesn't show up when I want him to.

"Jesus Began To Weep"

Now notice, thirdly, what Jesus does before he raises Lazarus. "Jesus began to weep." It's the shortest verse in the Bible, like a beautiful miniature work of art that adorns some medieval manuscripts. Fred Buechner urges us to keep track of the events in our lives that bring tears to our eyes. They may be happy or sad events. Maybe a funeral, a wedding or when Firemen raised the flag on the rubble of the World Trade Towers. Sometimes a song is played and our eyes tear up. Buechner claims that whenever we're stirred to shed tears, God is working a small miracle in our lives. Pay attention to your tears – *or your lack of tears*. Most of us close "those windows of weeping for fear someone will see us when we're not in control. But, when we slam those shutters back over the windows we cut off God himself" (Dr. Thomas Lane Butts, Jr.). I'd worry if nothing makes us cry.

That reminds me of something Dale Jones said at our Lenten Luncheon last Wednesday. Dale is replacing Buzz Tyson as the new director of the Lighthouse Youth Center. For those of you who don't know about the Lighthouse, it ministers primarily to "street kids." Many of the kids who attend come from *very* poor families, families where both parents have to work *so much* to provide the basics they don't have time to spend with their kids. As a result, young