

Signs of life
woman of faith -
woman right out - Truly dead
IAF
Lazarus
choice

Lazarus Laughed

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 5th Sunday in Lent, March 21, 1999. Scripture Lesson: John 11:1-45

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

1. The phone rings at your home in the middle of the night. The ringing sounds all the more insistent against the backdrop of silence and darkness. You do not reach for the phone immediately. Your mind cannot gather itself to make your hand move. Your breath comes in rapid gasps. Your first thought, when you can finally form one, hopes that it is a wrong number. But, of course, it is not a wrong number. The person on the other end of the line is calling from the emergency room, or the intensive care waiting room, or the police station. The one you love as much as you love yourself may be dying. *Can you come. Immediately.*

2. Near the end of Jesus' ministry. Jesus and his disciples received a call from Martha and Mary, two of his best friends. Come quickly. Lazarus, whom you love, is ill. Jesus delayed. Postponed. What would have been more important than immediately going to Bethany to heal his friend? Only after Lazarus had died did Jesus and his disciples head for Bethany. What was the sisters' reaction when he finally arrived too late? Jesus was too late: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Did Martha and Mary say these words with reproach and anger, or with dismay and disappointment? After all, Jesus was four days too late! It wasn't just a matter of missing a visit by friend. Lazarus died. He might have lived. He might have had one last chance to see his friend. But Jesus delayed his coming.

3. "Jesus, it's been four long days. The grave dug. The body wrapped. Lazarus buried. The tomb sealed. It's too late."

"Jesus, it's too late. By now the body stinks. If you had been here our brother would not have died." Too late.

4. Jesus, it's too late. My wife and I have separated. We tried counseling but it didn't work. My wife has moved out. I just got served with divorce papers. It's too late, Jesus."

"Jesus, we just got word from the lab. The cancer has metastasized. We waited too long. It's gone too far. It's too late, Jesus."

divorce

laboratory results

wake

“Jesus, I’ve been unhappy in my work for years. I go through the same old routine. But I’m not feeling fulfilled in what I’m doing. But I’m fifty years old now. It’s too late for a career move.”

Retirement

“We always talked about what we would do when he retired. We were going to take a Caribbean Cruise. We were going to travel coast to coast by rail. We were going to Hawaii. But now it’s too late. He’s gone.”

witness

“I wanted to tell him about Jesus for years. I never got up the nerve. I always found an excuse not to share my faith. And now he’s gone. It’s too late.”

Life is filled with, “It’s too late.” Jesus, it’s too late.

2. But the Gospel affirms that it’s never too late. The story of the raising of Lazarus affirms the good news that it’s never too late. Few things are harder to believe in our world than the Christian affirmation that it’s never too late.

Personal testimony

This story gives me hope. Sometimes when I am feeling depressed, hopeless, I take down my old King James Version of the Bible and I read this story of the raising of Lazarus. I read it aloud. I put aside my skepticism. I listen to the story on its own terms. I allow God to speak to me through the story. I read it silently. I read it aloud. I read it putting myself in the place of Mary and Martha; putting myself in the place of Lazarus; putting myself in the place of the disciples. I simply let the story work its magic on me.

Dostoevsky
Crime and
Punishment

I’m sure the story of the raising of Lazarus gave hope to the great Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky. The turning point in Dostoevsky’s great novel, Crime and Punishment comes when Sonia and Raskolnikov, together, read the story of the raising of Lazarus. Raskolnikov, the cold blooded murderer - murdered a woman for political reasons - murdered a woman for a few trinkets and then tried to justify his vile act. Never felt remorse for what he had done. He is with Sonja. Sonja is a young prostitute - forced into prostitution by the poverty of her family. Her father was an alcoholic. Never kept a job. Left his wife and family in poverty. Even encouraged his daughter into prostitution to provide food and clothing for the rest of the family. Raskolnikov and Sonja are together - the murderer and the prostitute and Sonja takes a Bible.

For both of them most people would say, "It's too late." But, with God, it's never too late. Sonia opens the Bible and reads about the raising of Lazarus. Hope is reborn in both of them. They both begin a long ascent from darkness to light, from death to life.

Eugene O'Neil's play, Lazarus laughed. "Laugh! Laugh with me! Death is dead! Fear is no more! There is only life! There is only laughter!" Years after Jesus has raised Lazarus, Lazarus is summoned by the Roman Emperor Tiberius. Tiberius believes in death and the power of death. He uses threats of death to get his way. But Lazarus has no fear of death.

Depression It's never too late. This afternoon we are having a workshop on understanding depression. So many people in our church and community have stopped hoping. They have become clinically depressed. How can the Gospel be heard better by us and by them: it's never too late.

"I am going to awaken" Jesus told his disciples that he was going to awaken Lazarus. "I am going there to awaken him." I need to hear the risen Christ say those words of me. "I am going to awaken Ted." "I am going to awaken the Oxford Presbyterian Church." I believe I need to be awakened spiritually. I need a rebirth of hope, a rebirth of life. I need to know and to affirm that it's never too late.

I believe this church, OPC, needs to be awakened spiritually. Just as Jesus went to the tomb of Lazarus, I want him to come to us to raise us to new life.

Jesus loves this church. He loves our families. Divorced. Single. Struggling financially. Suffering from depression and the dark night of the soul. He loves us. He loves you and me. And he is coming to us. He is coming to awaken us and to give us hope. Listen! Listen for his voice.

*women of Paul - Marjorie Hoyle
women right out - Judy Hasley
best friends - brother
lovers & friends*