

What a Surprise for dear ol' Lazarus

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
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The raising of Lazarus seems more like an Easter Season Gospel than a Lenten one, doesn't it? Here is the theme, "From Death to Life," but the bulletin cover tells us that this is the Fifth Sunday in Lent. The crucifixion and resurrection will come within the next two weeks, but not yet.

Let's remember that the 40 days of Lent do not include the Sundays, because every Sunday – even those in the Season of Lent – are celebrations of the Resurrection of Our Lord. The Gospel of Matthew puts it this way: "Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulcher" (Matthew 28:1). Because the resurrection of Jesus occurred on the first day of the week, Christians from the beginning used the first day of the week as their day of worship, not the Sabbath, or seventh day of the week. The resurrection was so important that the commandment to "remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy" was disregarded in deference to the resurrection.

Two weeks from today will be the Day of the Resurrection of Our Lord, but today we encounter not the Lord Jesus risen from the dead, but the raising of Lazarus. What was read earlier serves as a precursor to Jesus' resurrection. By raising Lazarus from the dead, we are given a glimpse of something much greater which is to come.

How does this incident fit into the Gospel of John? The raising of Lazarus comes from the eleventh chapter of John's Gospel. The thirteenth chapter begins with the celebration of the Passover. In John 13:2-4 we read, "And during supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus...rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet." That means the last eight chapters of John are devoted to the night in which Jesus was handed over by Judas, Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, trials, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. What I'm trying to point out is that the raising of Lazarus is like a bridge between (1) the earthly ministry of Jesus and (2) his final hours (what we know as "The Passion of the Christ).

The last miracle Jesus performs is the raising of Lazarus, and that is followed by the Lord God raising Jesus from the dead. The raising of Lazarus is not for our salvation, but the raising of Jesus is for us and for our salvation. The first raising of the dead is like an arrow pointing to the second which is for eternal life.

That salvation is spoken of in the reading this morning, for in it we get that gem which states, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” That’s the Good News in Christ Jesus. We stake our all on this promise.

Now I want to return to the action in the reading of the day. Verse six has a rather curious statement. It reads, “After having heard that Lazarus was ill, Jesus stayed two days longer in the place where he was.” If he was such a good friend of Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, why did Jesus not go immediately? Why delay? Then in verse 17, we read an even more curious statement, “When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.” Why the attention given to the number of days delay in Jesus going to Bethany and the number of days since Lazarus’ burial?

Sometimes we feel that Jesus is a bit slow to respond to our needs and prayers, our cries and pleas for help, strength, and direction. Where are you, Lord Jesus? I cannot hear you or see you!! It’s not beyond us to become frustrated with the ways of the Lord and to experience great impatience as we grapple with the will of the Lord for us in this decision, that perplexity, or some other concern. Both Martha and Mary separately express their frustration by saying to Jesus “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21, 32). They thought he could have done better.

Four days after burial, Jesus arrives. Some ancient rabbi’s, having adopted some aspects of Greek thinking, conceived of humans as made up of body, mind, and soul. That’s quite unlike the Hebrew understanding that a human being **is** a soul, not **has** a soul. Nevertheless, those ancient rabbis who thought in this Greek way taught that the soul hovered near the body for three days following death before departing. John telling us that Lazarus had been in the tomb four days is saying that for sure he was dead, all dead, totally gone, no chance of resuscitating him. He was really dead.

When I read and studied this text again this past week, I was reminded of a walking tour that Kay and I took a few times of Colonial Annapolis, Maryland, where we saw and learned what the city was like 250-300 years ago. The tour guide told us of a custom that arose in early Annapolis. When a person was buried, a string would be tied to an index finger, and that string was long enough to be above ground after the grave was filled in. On top of the soil, a bell would be tied to the end of the string, and then hung on a short piece of wood above the grave. For three nights, someone would sit at the graveside in case the bell rang signaling that the person underneath had been inadvertently buried alive. Three nights were enough, and all were totally convinced by the fourth day that the person was really dead. By the way, that vigil kept during the three nights at the grave site is the origin of our phrase, “the graveyard shift.”

That Colonial Annapolis custom reflects the teaching of some ancient rabbis that emphasized the four days required to declare a person really dead.

Only then did Jesus come on the scene, first sharing the sorrow of Martha and Mary, joining them in their grief and mourning. He was there, however, not just to empathize with mourners, but also and more importantly to give glory to God (verse 4). Jesus

shouted, “Lazarus, come out!” (John 11:43). To everyone’s surprise including Lazarus, “the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth” (John 11:44).

Have you heard Jesus call you name and tell you to “come out?” Come out of your obsessions and superficial attractions, aspirations and plans, come out of your self-pity or self-aggrandizement, worries and frets, sin and selfishness, and receive Life. Have you heard Jesus calling you to follow him in ways untried, onto roads unknown? “Come out!” Ultimately, Jesus calls us out of our selves and our sin to experience the forgiveness of sin and to be a new creation in him. Jesus calls that we might walk with him on the way everlasting, the way of justice and mercy, truth and peace.

In two weeks we will be here to celebrate the Queen of Feasts, the Day of the Resurrection of Our Lord, Easter. That is the most important day of the year for us – not Christmas, the Fourth of July, not my birthday, my wife’s birthday (although I sure wouldn’t want to forget that one), anniversary, graduation, or promotion. The resurrection of Christ Jesus, risen from the tomb and alive with us in this place, is the greatest gift of love the Father has given. Today, we have a prelude to that apex of faith, only a foretaste of what we will celebrate on March 23.

But still, this is the first day of the week, the day he rose never to die again. We thank the Almighty for today’s celebration of the resurrection of Jesus and remember his invitation: “O come let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker” (Psalm 95:6) and Redeemer, our Savior and King. Amen.