

## ***He Will Raise Us Up***

John 11-1:45

April 10, 2011

### **I.**

Today is a special day for us. After the service we will have our annual spring clean-up to which you all are invited even if you are not on a work roster. And the Men's Breakfast Group will be grilling its traditional tasty burgers and hot dogs. So, just come, hang out, and relax.

In addition, there's another extra benefit. My sermons usually are a little shorter on clean-up days so we can get to work on our buildings and grounds more quickly. The news just keeps getting better and better, doesn't it?

And finally, even though we still are in the season of Lent, we have a great Gospel reading with a happy ending that doesn't actually challenge us to do anything or to give up anything. It's just a neat little entertaining story about something that happened a long time ago.

Or is it? Perhaps there is more to it. Why, during Lent, a time of introspection and penitence, do we hear this uplifting message about Jesus raising his friend, Lazarus, from the dead?

In two ways this reading carries forward the themes of last week's reading. And we can see that they indeed are very appropriate for Lent.

The first part of the thread is that last week Jesus healed a blind man to show God's glory, and to give a preview of the coming kingdom where there is no pain. And this week he raised Lazarus to again show God's glory, and to give a preview of the resurrection and the hope of eternal life.

The other continuing idea is that just as Jesus said last week belief in him is at the heart of his healing power, this week he said he was raising Lazarus from the grave so that others would believe in him. Let's look at these themes and how they manifest themselves in the reading.

### **II.**

It begins with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, two sisters and a brother who knew Jesus well and sometimes accompanied him on his travels, although they were not with him in today's reading. Instead, Lazarus was home in Bethany, about two days away, sick and on the verge of death. And his sisters sent word for Jesus to come right away.

Jesus, however, did not do so and waited where he was for two more days. And the reading suggests that Jesus intentionally delayed so that Lazarus would die and then Jesus could go and raise him from the dead. This seems to have been Jesus' plan all along. He said that Lazarus' death was "for the Glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it."

And so, Jesus finally departed for his friends' home, and when he arrived Martha ran out and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Shortly thereafter, Mary came out and said the same thing, " Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

They were blaming Jesus for not showing up on time, according to their own schedule. Do we ever do the same thing? Have we ever thought, "God, where are you." "God, you should have been here earlier." "God, I know what's going on here. I can tell you what's needed."

But we all know, or eventually find out, that God has his own purposes and timetable, just as Jesus did in today's reading. Jesus began by telling Martha that Lazarus would rise again, and she thought he meant the resurrection at the last day.

And that raises an interesting question, doesn't it? How did Martha know anything about being raised on the last day? Certainly she had not yet heard one of today's communion hymns, one of our favorites here, *I Am the Bread of Life*, which tells that Jesus will raise us up on the last day.

But Martha probably did hear the words of that hymn in the words of Jesus about five chapters earlier in John's Gospel where he said God's will was that "all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day" (6:40).

And other parts of that hymn also are drawn right from today's reading. Jesus spoke again and said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

Then he said to Martha, "Do you believe this?" And she said "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Again, these are words right from our communion hymn. Think about them when we sing them in a little while.

And I ask us to think about them now, as well. "I am the resurrection and the life." Isn't this at the core of our faith? Isn't it indispensable to salvation? It's what we prepare for during Lent and celebrate on Easter.

And this is not some ambiguous theological statement just for Bible scholars. It is not just a remembrance from times past, nor is it some distant event in the mists of the future. Jesus is the resurrection and the life, right now. Resurrection and life are available at this moment through faith and belief in him.

### III.

So let's see how that is evident from the actual event. As they approached the tomb, Mary was crying and grieving, and those with her were doing the same. Jesus was deeply moved, which produced the shortest verse in the Bible. Two words, verse 35, "Jesus wept."

There are two theories about that. One is that Jesus was overcome by emotion at the sorrow of his friends, and his own emotions became evident. We could weep in similar circumstances.

The other, however, is that he knew Lazarus was with God's glory in the beauty of eternity, and he was about to do something terrible to his friend. He was going to snatch Lazarus out of heaven and drag him back into this broken world. That also might have made Jesus weep.

In any event, next came a momentous series of events. Lazarus was buried in a cave blocked by a large stone, and Jesus said to take away the stone. Martha, with her typical concern for neatness and order, said, "There is a stench because he has been dead four days." In the King James version, with which many of us grew up, Martha said, "Lord, he stinketh."

And the stone was taken away as Jesus offered a prayer thanking God that those who watched "may believe that you sent me." Then he said, "Lazarus, come out." That must have been a sight, for Lazarus emerged from the darkness of the cave, alive, and still wrapped up in his grave clothes. We don't know if a cheer went up, but it seems likely.

Then came the end of the story. Jesus said to unbind Lazarus and let him go, and the reading concludes by telling us that many who saw what Jesus had done believed in him.

### V.

Let's review that sequence again. Take away the stone. The smell of death. Come out! Unbind him and set him free. Belief in Jesus leads us on the same path. He takes away the burdens of

sin and guilt that confine us in our caves. He overcomes the foulness that Satan leaves behind. And he calls us into the light and unbinds us from the darkness of worldly shackles.

But it is not a one-time thing. Even though we believe just as those who watched Jesus believed, we are called to be always vigilant in our faith. Even though we have asked Jesus to come into our lives, he wants to speak with us in that relationship every day.

Young Lazarus was a believer, and yet he died so that Jesus could raise him. That is the model for our lives as believers. We trust that as we navigate the rocks and hazards of life, Jesus always will raise us and set us free.

St. Paul made this point in his letter to the Ephesians. He said, "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ [and] raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (2:4-6).

And so Jesus asks us the same question he asked Martha. After saying he was the resurrection and the life, he turned to her and said, "Do you believe this?"

That is the most important question we ever could be asked. And the answer is personal, not doctrinal. It is solely up to each of us, individually, every day, all the time. And I pray that Martha's words always will be our words. "Yes, Lord, I believe." *Amen.*