

John 11:1-44
March 9, 2008

South Plains
5th Sunday in Lent

Raising Lazarus, Raising Faith

“Lazarus, come out!”

With those words, Jesus confronts death and brings to a climax the seven signs recorded in the first half of John’s Gospel. He has saved a party from the disaster of running out of wine, healed the sick, cured the lame, opened the eyes of a man blind from birth, walked on water and made a picnic for thousands of people from five loaves and two fish. More importantly, he has made friends.

Not everyone counts Jesus as a friend. The religious authorities are growing increasingly frustrated with this powerful rabbi who has an answer for every objection, every criticism, every scriptural quotation they raise against him. Most annoying from the point of view of the scribes and the Pharisees is the way he consistently makes life better for people, even for non-believers. Unlike politicians who merely promise better days to come, Jesus delivers. “I came,” he says, “that they may have life, and have it abundantly (10:10).”

One more sign remains to be accomplished, a sign that will point unmistakably to God, to Jesus and to life. One sign drawing those three realities together. When people see life, they will think of God and Jesus. If

they are looking for God, they will find God where they see Jesus and life. With their eyes on Jesus, they will see the God of life.

The person who sees first and most clearly in this story, who sees for all of us, is Martha. Martha and Mary are sisters who live with their brother Lazarus in the suburbs outside Jerusalem, a place called Bethany. They had confidence in the rabbi’s ability to heal diseases and infirmities because they had seen it happen before and they believed. “Come quickly, Jesus, your friend Lazarus is ill.”

Jesus, however, will not be hurried, even for someone he loves. God has an agenda that we cannot change to suit our purposes, not even with our most fervent and pious prayers. By the time Jesus arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has been dead four days. The mourners are still paying their respects at the house. Martha confronts Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” There’s a trace of resentment in her words. Perhaps we hear anger because her next comment is goading Jesus to do something. “Even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”

Jesus replies, “Your brother will rise again.” Of course, he will rise again, says Martha, “in the resurrection on the last day.” “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. Do you believe this?" Jesus chooses his words carefully, cryptically so that Martha, who trusts him, can readily say, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Martha's profession of faith stands alongside Peter's confession on the road to Caesarea Philippi. In many ways, it is the heart of the good news and the heart of John's Gospel. "I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." It's all doctrinally correct and profoundly scriptural. But, she doesn't know what the words mean. They hang in the air like the jingle from a TV commercial, almost too familiar to change our lives.

Jesus moves from Martha to the other sister, Mary, who repeats the complaint, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." They weep, poignantly together, until Jesus asks to be taken to the tomb where the body of Lazarus lays. It was more like a mausoleum in a hillside than a grave in the ground. "Take away the stone," Jesus commands.

Outside Knoxville, Tennessee the medical school maintains the body farm made famous by the crime novel of Patricia Cornwell titled The Body Farm. No matter what our minds tell us about the natural processes of death and decay, our hearts tell us that a dead body deserves respect. We can understand why Martha

protests moving the stone that guarded the grave of her brother.

The New Revised Standard Version says, "There is a stench because he has been dead four days." The old King James reads simply, "He stinketh." The perfumes and spices used to anoint the Jewish dead were not embalming chemicals. By the fourth day, the stink of rotting flesh would have overcome any perfume. After more delay, the stone is finally rolled away and Jesus calls out loudly, "Lazarus, come out!" It's like a scene from a horror movie. The dead man walks. The burial cloths are still wrapped around the body, binding his movements. His face is hidden; and the bystanders are probably grateful. "Unbind him," orders Jesus, "and let him go."

Most of the Jews who had come to comfort Mary and Martha believed in the resurrection of the dead. It was an article of faith for the Pharisees. Most of us believe in life after death or the doctrine of the resurrection. We just don't believe such a fantastic thing would ever invade our present lives. Martha had just professed faith in Jesus as the Messiah and faith in the resurrection of the dead. But, she did not expect to see it happening.

The central claim of Jesus in John's Gospel is that Jesus is fulfilling the hope in the resurrection – now. Thus, he demonstrates that claim by raising the dead, not

by promising some wonderful life in the far distant future, but by bringing it to pass in the present.

Even though they die, they will live.
Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

We hear those words at least at Easter and probably at every funeral. They are not promises restricted to occasions when death is unavoidable, when the reality of the grave stares us blankly in the face. They are promises for today. Like Martha, we may say the right words, confessing our faith with the Apostles Creed or the Brief Statement of Faith or quotations from scripture. But, when Jesus asks, "Do you believe this?" He is not asking whether we are orthodox, Bible believing Christians, he is asking for the kind of faith that is simple trust, for the kind of loyal relationship that looks to God in Christ to sustain life every day.

Do you believe this? We need to hear that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, not just in worship, but when the deadline for taxes approaches.
When illness strikes.
When our job is downsized.
When report cards come out.
When our favorite college says no to our application.
When divorce threatens death to a marriage.
When we feel the chill of those words, "I don't love you."

Jesus is the resurrection and the life, even then. He defies all the deadly dullness of the same old boring routine as well as every attack on our joy and fulfillment. We can believe this because Jesus has proven power over death.

Mike Yaconelli indicts the church today for a paucity of astonishment. "The Good News," he says, "is no longer good news. it is OK news. Christianity is not long life *changing*, it is life *enhancing* (Dangerous Wonder). If Jesus does no more than enhance our lives, we are of all people most to be pitied. Jesus is in the business of resurrecting our lives today, if we are willing to trust him to give us a transfusion of his life, to live in us.

There are two reasons we fill our those Time and Talent Surveys, go on mission trips to SW Virginia, build Habitat for Humanity Houses, visit the nursing homes and engage in a variety of other mission opportunities. The first reason is to build relationships with each other, and with anyone else searching for a little grace in their lives. With every relationship we are sharing the trust of faith in Christ with another person. That people-to-people relationship becomes a channel for a God-to-people relationship. Nothing works better more efficiently for communicating faith because faith means trust.

The second reason for personal involvement in mission and ministry is the change it makes in our own lives. It's easy to see how going to Mexico or any third-

world country can be a life-changing experience. To trust God for safety and basic necessities in a developing context can open our eyes to the way God is providing for us every day. But, the same eye-opening experience happens when people learn to trust God in prayer with our needs and the needs of other people. The mission of Jesus is the life of the church and the life of the individual believer. Lives change when a Sunday School teacher really trusts God to make something of a rowdy class. It happens when we do more than the bare minimum in a friendship, but throw ourselves into the moment by risking time and ability in God's service.

Perhaps a good prayer for each of us this Lenten season would be to hear Christ speak the words to us that he spoke to Lazarus, "Come out, Presbyterians! Unbind them and let them go." Let's go in mission into that new life, that resurrection life that is ours in Christ Jesus.