

**The Fifth Sunday in Lent • April 10, 2011**

*St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA*

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John 11:1-45

“On the Lenten Road: At the Grave – Part 1”

“Lazarus, come out.” The silence was likely deafening. Jesus told the people to move aside the stone that had been covering his friend’s grave for the past four days. He had calmed Martha’s concern, even though she was probably more than a little confused by Jesus’ instruction. So the people stood there with the dead man’s sisters as Jesus prayed, addressing God as “Father” and thanking Him before calling out this command to the dead. They waited and watched, wondering what was going to happen next. So when Lazarus came out, restored to life, we can only imagine the sound of the shouts and cries and amazement that followed. At the grave that day, Jesus raised Lazarus, revealing God’s power and glory at work in him.

We know that part of the story. It’s a pretty amazing thing: Jesus demonstrates that he has power even over death. **But why does he raise Lazarus?** What’s the point if his friend is just going to die again at some point in the future? Today’s stop **On the Lenten Road** finds us at Lazarus’ grave, but we need to look back at how we got here. Let’s see what we might learn about Jesus and about his Father that brought us to that moment in time in Bethany when a dead man heard the call, “Lazarus, come out.”

Minutes earlier, Jesus had shed tears on the way to the tomb. Was he weeping for the loss of his dead friend? In his sorrow, did he decide to bring Lazarus back to life? No, Jesus had known what he was going to do. He knew that not even death could stop God, who created life itself. Indeed, Jesus’ heart goes out to Martha and Mary and all of those who are touched by the pain and grief of death. However, Jesus weeps not for himself, or for his friends’ loss; rather, his tears were tears of pity and compassion for all people and our condition of unbelief. Jesus was quietly outraged, deeply troubled and pained at the state of the broken world where death is a reality. You see, death isn’t natural; it was not a piece of God’s plan for His creation. Death came into the world through sin, through mankind wanting to live apart from our Creator’s will. You could say that death isn’t supposed to be part of life. Jesus knew that, and so he wept, even though his friend would soon be restored to life – for a time.

**We need to look farther back if we want to know why Jesus did what he did.** So how about we go back a few days earlier, when the messenger came to let Jesus and his disciples know that their friend Lazarus had fallen ill? What happened then? Word comes that Lazarus is sick. Jesus loves Lazarus like a brother. And so, Jesus waits where he is. Huh? If you or I received word that a loved one was gravely ill, that probably wouldn’t be the choice that we’d make. But Jesus stays put, for two more days. What does that tell us about Jesus and his intention? We know that he cares for this family, so it’s not that he’s indifferent to their need and hurt. Jesus tells his disciples, *“This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”* Lazarus might have already died by the time that the messenger arrived. And still, Jesus was right. The illness didn’t lead to death; rather it led *through* death. Jesus knew what he would do, and why he would do it. **Jesus’ love for Lazarus and Martha and Mary and the disciples – and us – motivated his waiting.** Jesus waited those two days to put to rest any doubt that Lazarus’ resurrection could be anything other than a miracle from God. You may have heard that some rabbis held that the soul of a dead person would hover around their body for three days, waiting to get back in, but finally gave up when decomposition set in. Four days passing after Lazarus’ death would have shown that his death was irreversible. Those who witnessed the raising of Lazarus could not help but recognize God at work. The people who gathered at the grave that day, the mourners, the disciples, Martha, Mary – even Lazarus – were given an amazing sign of who Jesus is,

and Whose work he was doing. Jesus waited, even to the pain of his beloved friends, **for their benefit**, so that they might witness God's glory. Indeed, we read that many of the Jews who had accompanied Mary out to her brother's tomb came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, as did others later on. Jesus waited to show that **he alone is the resurrection and the life**. He is the one who brings victory over the grave for all who believe in him.

There's a reason that this text from John's Gospel shows up at this point in the church year. Lent and Easter are inextricably linked. You can't really have one without the other. Lent calls to mind our need for God's saving work in our lives, our need for the forgiveness that comes through Jesus and his sacrifice for us. Easter shows that God delivers on His promises. If you looked at the title of this sermon, you can see that it hints at something more. We will return to a grave in a couple of weeks, but it won't be Lazarus' tomb at Bethany. But we need to know how we'll get there, and our Gospel text points ahead. If you kept reading through the end of chapter 11, you'd hear how some of the people who'd been there to witness Jesus' raising Lazarus went back to Jerusalem to tell the Pharisees what he'd done. They, in turn, gathered with the chief priests and the Sanhedrin Council. This incident at the grave in Bethany prompts these leaders of the people to resolve to kill Jesus. He was a threat to their authority and power, a threat to the established order. Though he wasn't aware of the truth behind his words, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to the assembled leaders, *"You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish."* That's what we remember during Lent, that it is better for all people that the Son of God should die for us than that we all know death apart from God. They were right: Jesus was indeed a threat to the established order – and he still is! Jesus is a threat to the established order of sin and death, under whose tyranny you and I live every single day. Some days, we do feel the pain of this order more deeply than others.

So why did Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead? **God's plan from eternity – the plan which Jesus was carrying out, in part, at Lazarus' tomb – was to deliver His Son to the cross and the grave, to destroy the tyrant which is death.** Like Lazarus, we are mortal. As it is said, the two certain things in life are death and taxes. Unless Jesus returns before we die (or before April 15), we live under those aspects of a broken world. But for Christians, those called to faith in Jesus as the resurrection and the life, death is like falling asleep. Painful though it may be, death is a temporary state. Martha knew that Lazarus would rise again on the last day. But the resurrection that Jesus will bring to us isn't like the one that Lazarus experienced. Lazarus was still mortal. But we look ahead to Easter and the promise of something more, that "Part 2." This is the life about which Jesus said, *"Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."* The resurrection and life that comes through Jesus isn't temporary: it's eternal. We have only a glimpse of it in the Scriptures in the Easter resurrection, where Jesus became the firstborn from the dead. But that's what Jesus promises us. That's the life that God pledges to us in Baptism. It doesn't come as a result of us living perfect lives; it comes from God's loving grace in Jesus. And as he demonstrated his power over death in raising Lazarus, we know that Jesus can deliver. **He can and will bring life to dead, dry bones.**

On that last day, should we have fallen asleep, we will hear that voice that spoke to Lazarus at the grave, saying, "My child, come out."

Amen.