

Lazarus Was Dead  
Fifth Sunday in Lent  
March 9, 2008  
Dr. Charles Curley  
State College Presbyterian Church  
Ezekiel 37:1-14  
John 11:1-44, abridged

Lazarus Was Dead  
"Father, I thank you that you have heard me."  
John 11:41b

On this fifth, and last, Sunday in the season of Lent, as Jesus draws ever nearer to the cross, the lectionary brings us to the story of Lazarus.

It's a story we all know – but seldom think about.

What do we know? "Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead."

I guess you either believe or you don't that such a thing could happen.

But after you decide that – what is there left to think?

Who, after all, was Lazarus?

We know little about him, except that he was dead.

He is never mentioned anywhere else in the gospels.

We do know two things about him.

First – we know Lazarus had two loving sisters. Mary and Martha (we read their story in another part of the gospel).

The second thing we know, is that Lazarus was Jesus' "friend." We read that Jesus "loved him."

When you have a friend, and your friend needs help, you do what you can.

So when Lazarus was ill, naturally his sisters sent to Jesus for help.

"You have healed others, why not your friend?"

But Jesus did not do what they thought he would do.

"This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God."  
Now, if you heard that, what would you think?

A-ha! A healing's coming!

After all – Jesus had healed from a distance before – with the Centurian's daughter –  
"Just say the word and she will be well."

Jesus did.

And she was. Well.

Yet now, in spite of all their expectations – Mary's, Martha's, the expectation of those  
who followed Jesus.

Yet now Lazarus dies.

Jesus was too late and when he finally arrived, Lazarus was dead, and Jesus wept.

There are those who claim that Jesus purposely allowed Lazarus to die so that he might  
work a great miracle.

I don't believe that at all, for Jesus wept. He broke down and cried because he had lost  
a friend, and it hurt. He mourned the death of his friend.

Mary didn't help him in his grief.

Listen to what Mary said to Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not  
have died."

Which is to say, "Lord, why weren't you here?"

I want you to listen to Mary, because we have been there, every one of us!

We have been there with Mary.

In times of illness and loss.

In times of disappointment and failure.

Times when we have felt bereft and alone and no help comes.

And we also want to cry out: "Lord, why weren't you here?"

Mary wants an answer "Jesus, why didn't you do something?"

Mary wants an answer, and there is no answer.

How is Mary's question our question? When we come face to face with sorrow, or loss – illness or failure -- some very primitive fears arise -- and they are often fears for ourselves.

These fears attack the very framework of our lives, the structure which helps us make sense out of life.

The supporting structure of Mary's life had as its foundation an assumption which went something like this: "We are friends of Jesus, Jesus will not let anything bad happen to us."

But Lazarus died, and the framework of Mary's life came tumbling down.

She had lost her brother, but she had also lost the structure which enabled her to make sense out of life.

As she faced the irreversible, physical evidence of Lazarus' death, something inside her died as well.

In this world, there are many ways to die. Relationships die, belief withers, confidence in our own ability to cope evaporates, hopes for peace, health and happiness fade away before the harsh realities of life.

Look around you. Shall I list the places in our world where Lazarus is dead?

Gaza and the Sudan.

Kenya and Afganistan.

Burma, North Korea, and Iraq.

And in our own land for those who have lost jobs, lost homes, lost all their savings, lost hope.

Those anywhere and everywhere who experience emptiness and loneliness and violence.

Our Lazarus is dead and Jesus weeps for us, every one of us.

Then Jesus did one of the strangest things he would ever do.

Even as he was weeping for his lost friend, against all the evidence that Lazarus was gone forever, Jesus trusted in God's promise and proclaimed life.

"Lazarus, come out!"

And it was so.

It made no sense in the natural order of things, but it made perfect sense in terms of who Jesus was.

Jesus prayed to his Father God.

The tense of Jesus' prayer is important.

He did not pray, "Father, hear me."

Rather, "Father, you have heard me." "I thank you, you have heard me."

This was not intercession for the lost life of a friend, but thanksgiving for what God had already done.

That Lazarus actually walked out of the tomb was coincidental - because Jesus was declaring that God's glory is in the world, and none of the old rules are in force any more.

Jesus helped Mary see that it is not just a matter of my faith being able to take care of me in a crisis; rather, the glory of God has already pronounced the death of all kinds of deaths.

When we are dried up, cut off, all hope lost, God says (to paraphrase the prophet Ezekiel): "I will bring you home, I will put my spirit in you, you will live! "

When will this be?

Off in the future?

Up in heaven?

No! "I have done it, says the Lord (Ezekiel 37:14)."

In the midst of the darkest, emptiest of our days, Jesus says to us: Come out! Live!

Like Mary, we cannot be content unless we know.

When we say, "Jesus, if you had only been there. . ."

Then it is that he calls us to trust, not that everything will turn out for the best by-and-by, but that there is a new, freeing, life-giving creation in Jesus Christ.

When we are like Lazarus, Jesus calls us and tells us that we need not be bound and entombed by the many deaths which bind us, not even by the fear of bodily death.

He unbinds and frees us and calls us, saying, "Live!"

In any of our deaths, whenever life emerges out of the tomb, it is because the glory of God has been poured out on our lives, and we can never be the same again.

When you have been unbound, like Lazarus, from death and the fear of death, then you know that the greatest thing you can do in this world is proclaim the glory of God who brings us life.

Yes, weep over the forces of death, but proclaim the life-giving glory of God with all your being.

Jesus says to you: "Come out! Live!"

"I have done it, says the Lord."

Amen