

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 10, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep...”

Well, I warned you last Sunday—the scripture readings for the season of Lent get longer as we approach Holy Week and Easter. Today, the account in John’s Gospel (John 11:1-45) concerning the events surrounding, first, the death of Lazarus and, then, the raising of Lazarus from the dead goes on for quite awhile. As I have already suggested, the reason for the extended length of those readings has to do with an effort to place the story in full context, to tell exactly what happened, and , finally, to show what the “fallout” or lasting impact was.

This particular story certainly deserves a through retelling because the facts seem so incredible and unbelievable. Far more than turning water into wine, restoring a blind man’s sight, or even walking on water, this event *really* tests the limits of our credibility—Jesus bringing back to life someone who has died and been buried for four days! How are we to understand this wildly implausible story? It seems to contradict everything we know about the fragile nature of life and the finality of death. This story is so far out that we might wonder what the writer of John’s Gospel was thinking. Might this be such a “whopper” that it probably should have been left out of the book entirely lest the common sense of the reader might be more offended than his faith in Jesus be increased?

I suppose there are two directions from which we might approach this curious scripture reading: we could start with the assumption that what we have here is nothing more than an engaging symbolic, metaphorical story or we could accept it as a factual, historical event that is completely miraculous and incomprehensible. If we take the first route toward trying to make sense of the story of Lazarus what we are led to conclude is that this account is the writer’s attempt to witness to his belief that Jesus is, indeed Lord over all—that Jesus exercises command over ALL things, even the forces of life and death. If we take the second route, we have to conclude that life eternal is not some strictly **future** promise reserved only for the end of Time—the final redemption of the whole Creation. We have to accept that God is right here-and-now bringing life out of death, meaning out of chaos and despair. Miracles that overturn science and reality are not only possible but can be fully expected, here and now, within our everyday experience.

Within the words of scripture there’s no hint as to what the author’s intention might be. The writer of John’s Gospel doesn’t reveal to us his own interpretation of this story. He simply tells it and leaves it up to us to figure out how we want to understand it. We can, however, draw some notion about what he probably had in mind as he decided to include this account—one that is not found at all in the earlier Gospel narratives from Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Whereas the earlier Gospel accounts were written primarily for readers who either had never heard or knew very little about the Christian story, John’s Gospel comes from a much later time—when his readers were primarily committed followers of Jesus, part of a rapidly growing body of church members. John isn’t so much interested in convincing or converting people. His

goal is to strengthen and support believers in their faith during a time of persecution. He seeks to offer compelling assurance that Jesus is, indeed, able to protect and deliver those who put their trust in him. His text is offered to people facing struggle and death and the message is, throughout, focused on life, light, hope, and triumph—the victory of Jesus over any and all forces of evil and death. For those who put their lives in the loving hands of Jesus, he is saying, there **will** be vindication. No matter how bad things may look in the present, the message of John's Gospel is to hold onto your faith because nothing—not even death—can stand before the power of God.

Now, keeping that goal in mind, you can surely see why the story of the Raising of Lazarus from the tomb is so perfectly attuned to the purposes for which John's Gospel was written. You can also see why, as a scripture reading, it is so perfect a selection to have read each year in church services just before the events of Holy Week and Easter.

We are invited to see ourselves as being like Lazarus. Just as Lazarus was the dearly loved friend of Jesus, so are we also. Each and every one of us has been received, in love, by Jesus and we have been promised that Jesus will never forget or forsake us—no matter what. Though we may have strayed from God's ways, though it may be that we have shut our eyes to the truth, though it may be as if we were dead, Jesus is still there and he still offers us eternal life. He is able to open the tomb of our self-imposed darkness and bring us once more into the light.

Whether you understand the story of Lazarus as a metaphorical picture of the way in which Jesus is able to bring our spiritual beings "back to life" or whether you accept it as a miraculous fact which demonstrates in concrete terms the power of Jesus to overcome every force of evil, I think this story legitimately commends itself to our thought and prayer. In short, it's a powerful "attention grabber" as we head into Holy Week and all those events that also focus on the life-giving promises eternally held out to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

During the next two weeks, **you** will be offered spiritual rebirth. You will have the opportunity to come out of darkness and into the light. You will have the chance to be reborn in Faith....to have a whole new beginning.

What you do with all that is entirely up to you.

It's interesting that following this remarkable story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, we never hear another word about Lazarus in the Bible. We might well wonder how he used the New Life that Jesus gave to him. Did Lazarus become a powerful witness to the wonder of God's love or did he simply go on with his ordinary life, content to carry on with business as usual. We don't know. But one thing we DO know is that, according to the story as the writer of John's Gospel tells it, Jesus was confident that Lazarus had everything he needed, that he could pick up and move forward on his own. Jesus says to him, "Lazarus, come out of the tomb!" and he tells the Crowd, "Unbind him and let him go."

You see, the new life that Jesus offers is not one with strings attached. Spiritual rebirth truly sets people FREE.