

2 April 2017
Lent 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Lazarus Life”

Text: John 11:1-53 (Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:1-11)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Pharisee, the Samaritan woman, and the man born blind; the people we've considered the last three weeks. Each had been taught to think a certain way. Whether it was from formal schooling, from the way they were brought up, from what everyone else around them was saying, or from how they were being treated, they had been taught to think a certain way about themselves, the world, and God.

And then Jesus came along. And Jesus not only changed their lives, but taught them that this way they had been thinking, the so-called truths they had believed and had been living, were completely wrong. And this new way of thinking, this Jesus way of thinking, was truly good news indeed. That the things of God aren't earned, they're gifts. That you're not garbage, you are a child dearly loved by God. And that God doesn't always act in ways we think or expect. In fact, when you think you've got God figured out is exactly when you don't!

So I hope all this has caused you to think a little. About how the world has taught us to think, *'cause it has. And it is.* We're bombarded with messages and teaching every day, about how things are and why things happen. Whether it's from formal schooling, from the way we were brought up, from what everyone else around us is saying, or from how they are treating us and others. And yet, maybe all that isn't right at all . . . as the three people we've considered so far found out from Jesus.

And then to maybe think about how you've been on the other side of that equation, too. To think about how you've lived, and what you've been teaching others through your own actions and words and attitudes. Maybe they've been a problem, too. Something that we could and *should* repent of this Lenten season. That our thinking and our lives have been upside down, and we need this new way of thinking . . . or more of it. This Jesus way of thinking and living. I hope maybe you've thought about that, as I have been.

And today, we get to the last of the four people who walked into Jesus; the one who in many ways is the culmination not only of Jesus' teaching and miracles, but the very exemplar of our wrong way of thinking. And that person *is the dead man.*

Now it sounds funny to say that a dead man walked into Jesus, because dead men can't walk, right? They just lie there. *But this one does.* After four days in the tomb, when he should have already been rotting and stinking, he walks out alive and well.

So what have we been taught to think about death? Well, a great deal. The mystery of death has led to many different teachings; many things people believe happen when you die. There are books and movies and things people say at funerals just to help us feel better at the death of a loved one. And maybe the mourners who had gathered to mourn with Mary and Martha were saying some of those things.

And Martha, she *almost* got it right. She tells Jesus of her hope; her hope which came from the Scriptures. *Yes Lord*, she says. ***I know that he*** - my brother, Lazarus - ***will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.*** But what Martha *doesn't* know (yet) is that she isn't going to have to wait until the last day - the last day has, in a sense, come to her! And so Jesus says to her: ***I AM the resurrection and the life.*** Or in other words, don't just look to the Last Day for your hope, look to ME for your hope. What Jesus is saying here, teaching us, is that the resurrection isn't a thing or a day, **but a person.** And where that person is, where Jesus is, there is resurrection and there is life.

And so with Jesus' coming, there is life in the midst of death. The end is already breaking into the *here and now*. Heaven has come to earth. Jesus is bringing the blessings of the end already to us now, *here in time*.

Isn't it true? In heaven there is no sin, no sickness, no death. And wherever Jesus goes, there sin forgiven, sickness healed, and death reversed. The Samaritan woman is forgiven, the blind man is healed, and now Lazarus is raised. All of them, with Nicodemus, born again, born from above. It's like this black and white photo of a world steeped in sin and death, but with a streak of color wherever Jesus goes. For He is the resurrection and the life. Wherever He is, there is Paradise again. Resurrection and life.

Really. After Adam and Eve plunged into sin, they hid and then were covered. And now Lazarus isn't just alive, He comes out of hiding and is uncovered.

But a world steeped in death and used to death and bent on death cannot see that. Caiaphas and the Jewish Council gather together to figure out what to do. And their answer . . . well, it's predictable: *death*. Death to Jesus. We cannot let Him continue running around healing the sick and raising the dead and turning our world upside down! He is dangerous. He must die. He must be crucified.

And that's what Lazarus would see in just a short time. The one who raised Him from the dead put to death Himself on the cross, wrapped in grave cloths like he was, and then laid into a tomb very much like his. *How could that be? Where is our hope now? Where is resurrection and life now?* In a tomb. And their mourning over Lazarus' death was

nothing compared to the depths of grief they felt that Saturday after the crucifixion.

But as Caiaphas unknowingly prophesied, this was necessary. Jesus' own death and Jesus' own resurrection necessary that not just Lazarus be raised, but that we be raised as well. That the sin and death that binds all of us - and indeed *all of creation* - be broken once and for all. By the Son of God who enters our grief, who enters our sin, who enters our death, and breaks it, so that we can enter His joy and have His forgiveness and life. What happened to Lazarus a picture of what will happen to us.

But not just what will happen to us - what actually already has. For the one who is the resurrection and the life, who went to Bethany to raise the dead, has come here to do the same. To raise us, already here and now, from death to life. For when Jesus meets a person at the font - *there is resurrection and life*. When Jesus meets a sinner confessing their sin - *there is resurrection and life*. When Jesus preaches in Church and proclaims in the world His Word of life - *there is resurrection and life*. When Jesus encounters those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and for the gifts here in His Supper, in His Body and Blood - *there is resurrection and life*. There is forgiveness, there is new life.

For as with Lazarus at Bethany so here too: where Jesus is, there is life in the midst of death. The end is already breaking into the *here and now*. Heaven has come to earth. Jesus is bringing the blessings of the end already to us now, *here in time*.

Which means that old Caiaphas and the Council were right in this regard too: Jesus is dangerous to our way of life. Our *old* way of life. Our *old* way of thinking, our *old* ways of living and being and acting. For He gives us something new, something different. A new life. In Him. A new life that is not in the things of this world and life, but in Him. So that we don't have to hide anymore. So that we don't have to cover up our sin anymore but can confess it and receive forgiveness for it. So that we do not have to fear death anymore, or mourn as those who have no hope. But know that, as Jesus says, death is merely sleep to Him. That ***whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.***

That's the good news that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus learned that day. And like Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, and the blind man, their lives were turned upside down. They were changed from that day forward. As your life has been. For by Jesus' word, your life is not the same. You're not the same. You've been made new, too. Your dry bones given new life. Not to live according to the flesh, but as Paul said, to live according to the Spirit of God who has been given to you. That your old sinful flesh be crucified with Christ, and a new man raised with Christ. And that when you see that old sinful flesh coming out again, its thinking coming back again, its life living again, to slay it again in repentance. That's not who you are anymore. You have a life different, better. A Nicodemus life, a Samaritan woman life, a blind man life, and a Lazarus life. That's you life now, too, in Jesus.

So today we entered into Passiontide - the last two weeks of this Lenten season. The crosses have been veiled, the banners are down, and even more of the liturgy taken away from us - all signifying how the Lord was taken away from us in His death. That day when (perhaps) Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the blind man, and Lazarus all saw their Lord and life-giver taken away from them.

We'll remember that too, that *Good Friday*, and celebrate then on Easter what it all means, what we confess in the Creed: *the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting*. That Jesus not only did all this, but that He did all this **for you**. That no matter how dark, no matter how deep, no matter how intense the sin and death, the hatred and opposition, the sadness and destruction gets here and now, it cannot and will not have the victory over you. For like Nicodemus, you've been born again, from above. Like the Samaritan woman, you've been betrothed to your heavenly Bridegroom. Like the man born blind, you've been given the eyes of faith to see. And like Lazarus, you've been raised to a new life by the Word of Jesus. For this Lenten season, in hearing their stories we've heard our story. In seeing them, we've seen ourselves. And know that their Saviour is our Saviour, too. All this, **for you**. Where Jesus is, there is life. And Jesus is here. With life, for you. Thanks be to God!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.