

John 11:21-27 4/12/09 (Triumphant Entry #15 – Easter) **LAZARUS**

Rev. Joel F. Hoyer, Grace Lutheran Church, Coopersville, MI

I have preached on this passage from John 11 several times. It is of course, one of the most beautiful resurrection passages of the Bible where Jesus gives us those powerful words:

Slide: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” (John 11:25-26)

It’s a passage that absolutely gets to the heart of what we’re all doing here today. Which we need desperately, considering the confusion that’s out there...

Slide: Rabbit video from Skit guys

“Don’t let the rabbit hide the resurrection.” Do we need that warning in our society today? Absolutely. The rabbit and the little marshmallow peeps and the plastic grass in the Easter basket are cute and all, but they kind of don’t compare with the whole “Jesus rising from the dead thing.” That’s why we’re here. And we’re going to come at Jesus’ resurrection today from the perspective of the resurrection of one of Jesus’ good friends, Lazarus. As I said, I’ve preached on this passage before, but I noticed that I have always come at this text from the perspective of Mary and Martha grieving the loss of their brother, never from the perspective of Lazarus. I think I might be forgiven for this, considering the fact that Lazarus was DEAD.

I don’t know where Lazarus was during that time in the tomb, but you can bet people were asking him about it afterward. In fact, that’s one of the reasons everyone joined into the triumphant procession

Slide: Triumphant Entry

(and why the church leaders are frowning in the painting). The raising of Lazarus happened in Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem. It was from Bethany that Jesus had the disciples pick up the donkey he was riding in the picture. The Bible says that the day before Palm Sunday...

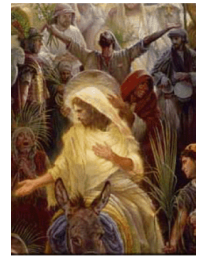
Slide: “Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.” (John 12:9)

And wouldn’t you want to see him too? Wouldn’t you want to ask him about his experience? I think so. But then the next verse is just unbelievable!

Slide: Pharisees pic and “So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well (as Jesus), for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.” (John 12:10-11)

Well, Yeah... He’s just raised somebody from the dead who’s been in the grave for four days! If that isn’t the power of God, I don’t know what is. And the sick thing is, the chief priests and Pharisees saw it, they knew it had happened, but they simply did not want to believe. We talked about that when we zeroed in on them in this picture. In fact, backing up to the day of Lazarus’ resurrection, the Bible says:

Slide: “Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.”



“What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” (John 11:45-48 NIV)

It’s absolutely unbelievable! They were more concerned about “their place”, their power and position, than they were about recognizing the Messiah, the One who had been prophesied in the Old Testament to come and save His people.

Just to further frame this event and put this picture into context, it seems that Jesus kind of hung out with his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, until the day when He shows Himself publically on what we know as Palm Sunday. Certainly Jesus was in their house the day before – six days before the Passover (also the day of Jesus’ crucifixion). On that occasion the Bible says:

Slide: Mary pic and “Here a dinner was given in Jesus’ honor. Martha served, (typically) while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” (John 12:2-3 NIV)

That’s when Judas took offense and said “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor. It was worth a year’s wages.” (12:5) And John gives us the insight on that comment by telling us “He did not say this because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.” (v. 6)

So we have these details surrounding Lazarus, but we don’t have anything really from Lazarus himself. We’re left to speculate. And I think it’s fascinating, when we come back to the painting, to speculate about this guy directly behind Jesus, as being Lazarus.

Slide: Triumphant Entry pic Highlight and bring up Lazarus

We don’t know that. Again, Tom DuBois didn’t originally paint this character into the painting as Lazarus, but as he sees the painting with us now through the eyes of faith, he is absolutely affirming what we’re seeing there and just praising God for these kinds of insights as he praises God for also using the whole process of this painting and searching out who Jesus really is, to lead him to the faith.

So as we imagine this guy to be Lazarus, just think about how it fits! In the painting, he almost seems to be springing right out of the body of Jesus.

Slide: Expanded Lazarus pic

Well... Didn’t he?! His life did come from Jesus’ life, without question. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me shall live, even though he dies.” What better exclamation point on those words of Jesus could there have been than the raising of Lazarus? The words would have been true regardless, but the **reality** of the words was shown with power and truth this resurrection.

Of course, how much more in his own resurrection that we celebrate today. Jesus also spoke of this great day. Remember, He said, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” And John tells us that the temple he had spoken of was his Body. Today we celebrate once again the fulfillment of that prophecy in the resurrection of our Lord. At various times, I’ve spoken to you about the many proofs of the resurrection, but I’m not coming at it that way this morning. Nevertheless I have to share with you a story I picked up about one of those liberal pastors who publicly doubt the real and physical resurrection of Jesus.

It seems a lady wrote in to a Christian question and answer forum. "Dear Sirs, Our preacher said on Easter, that Jesus just swooned on the cross and that the disciples nursed Him back to health. What do you think? Sincerely, Bewildered." And the response:

"Dear Bewildered, Beat your preacher with a cat-of-nine-tails with 39 heavy strokes, nail him to a cross; hang him in the sun for 6 hours; run a spear thru his side...put him in an airless tomb for 36 hours and see what happens." Sincerely, Pastor Charles.

You know, it never ceases to amaze me that a person could remain a pastor, once he had bought the lie of Satan that Jesus didn't really rise from the dead. What is the point? Paul makes it very clear,

Slide: "...if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." (1Cor 15:14 NIV)

Because we would have believed a lie and there would be no hope for life after death. If the Son of God can't come back from the dead, then he certainly doesn't have power to raise us. But folks, I can guarantee you that one person who didn't doubt the power of Christ to rise, was Lazarus.

Coming back to the picture again, if we imagine this guy to be Lazarus, look at his position. What's he doing? He's giving us the "V" for Victory sign, isn't he? It's just a beautiful picture of someone who gets it, who knows that Jesus is the resurrection and the life and wants to shout out that great truth through every pore of his body. In contrast to so many in this picture who are disinterested or antagonistic or confused, Lazarus gets it. It's about victory! Victory over death and sin and Satan.

Many of you have been reading the interesting book that has made such a big splash recently, "90 Minutes in Heaven", the story of Pastor Don Piper, whose car and body were crushed by a semi that crossed into his lane. Pronounced dead on the scene, Piper claims to have experienced the glories of heaven, awed by its beauty and color and beautiful music until a fellow pastor literally prayed him back to life. Now, it's hard to know what to do with a book like that, or with somebody else's experience. It's interesting that Don himself tends to be very skeptical of most of the other near death experiences he's read about. But he doesn't doubt his own. And how can we know? You can't argue with his experience. You didn't have it.

What I liked about the book though, was not really about his experience with heaven, but about what came after. After Don got done feeling sorry for himself because he had to come back to earth and suffer the rehabilitation of horrific injuries, he started to use his experiences to help others. Not just telling them about the heaven thing, but more so, coming alongside of others who were experiencing the kind of pain he had gone through. It took him awhile, but he began to see a purpose for everything that had happened, and he is determined to live the resurrected life. And that is exactly what I can imagine Lazarus doing. I doubt very much if anyone could have kept Lazarus from being one of those in that Palm Sunday procession, shouting for all he was worth, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

Now, as I've mentioned, I don't know where the soul of Lazarus went during those four days. The Bible doesn't tell us, so I don't know. Was he in heaven during that time? Did he experience what that was like? It seems cruel to think that Jesus would allow him to experience paradise and then haul him back. But knowing what the Bible says about God, that: "He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong,

upright and just is he.” (Deut 32:4 NIV) I am quite content that Jesus figured that out in a perfect way. Just as he gave Lazarus a perfect opportunity to be a witness to Jesus as the Son of God and the Savior of the world.

How would you like to be able to give that testimony to people? “I was dead and because of Jesus I am alive!” Well, that is your testimony! The Bible tells us that is exactly the testimony that each of us who believe in Him can take to the world.

Slide: “...because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.” (Eph 2:4-7 NIV)

You know, it must have been an extremely cool scene when Jesus bowed his head and prayed to God the Father about Lazarus, for the benefit of those standing there, then He faced the tomb and said in a loud voice, “Lazarus, Come out!” And Lazarus came out. But you know what will be cooler? When Jesus comes again on the Last Day and says to all of us who believe in Him, Come out! And we will. Jesus said:

Slide: “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out...” (John 5:28-29)

And I can’t wait. But in the meantime Jesus calls us to live in the victory of His resurrection and our resurrection **today**. To be alive in Christ now, to claim the fact that Jesus, by His grace, took the punishment for our sins and died our death upon the cross, so that we are freed from our sins and free to live victorious lives as we wait for our final resurrection.

Folks, I hope that you have appreciated this series and the majesty of this painting,

Slide: Triumphant Entry and Lazarus pic

but I also hope and pray that this was not just an academic exercise with you – that you just stuffed your head with some new facts about the people and places surrounding Jesus’ Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem. Again, when Jesus was talking with Martha, He declared: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believe in me will never die.” - because death will be just a door through which they will walk into the presence of their Savior to be with Him forever. But then He asked Martha and He asks you the most important question in the Bible, the most important question you will ever be asked: “Do you believe this?” Why is it so important? Because, should the Lord tarry, you’re going to live a few more years, 70 or 80 “if we have the strength”, as the Bible says, then you are going to die – and then what? For those who confess Jesus as Lord it’s going to be the LIFE that is really life, the LIFE that is going to make this poor shell of a life look sick. It’s going to be in the presence of the One who loves us with an everlasting love, the One who is the Resurrection and the Life. For those who reject Jesus it’s going to be the opposite. That’s the truth. That’s why you’re here today. That’s why we’re not going to let the rabbit hide the resurrection. That’s why I pray for each of you here today that once you get done seeing yourself as this guy

Slide: Blind beggar

Receiving the healing and forgiving touch of Christ, you will forever see yourself as this guy

Slide: Lazarus

Following your Lord and Savior Jesus, taking your life from His life and living in the victory He came to win. Amen.