

Grace, mercy & peace from God our Father & our Lord, Jesus Christ

I've used this raising of Lazarus reading from John countless times as the gospel reading for funerals over the years. It commends itself in any number of way at or around the time of a death. The raising of Lazarus ***demonstrates Jesus power over death, but it does more than that;*** it also shows that even though the people harbor varying levels of doubt in Jesus – from those in the crowd who say why Jesus didn't keep Lazarus from dying to Mary and Martha who express their faith that Lazarus will be raised on the last day – ***no one believes that Jesus has the power to raise the moldering body of Lazarus back from death to life, and certainly no one even entertains the possibility that Jesus can with a few Words bring the stinking, rotting flesh of Lazarus back to life again.***

That image as Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb by name serves as a powerful reminder for those in the throes of grief ***that Jesus with the same few simple words will call their loved one out from the tomb on the day of resurrection.*** Saying those words, “*and on the last day, Jesus will come to the tomb and say to Fred or Margaret or Lenora or Gert come out,*” creates a memorable image of a resurrection event yet to come.

But I firmly believe that the gospel writer John intends so much more in the telling of the tale than that Jesus has power – even to raise the dead on the last day – as Mary and Martha profess. No. Not just that. The eleventh chapter of John is a testimony that even in the face of absolute doubt – and there was no shortage on that day, just as there is no shortage of doubt today – that ***even in the face of doubt Jesus' words have the power to raise us to new life here and now in the present, even when we***

are already dead.

But you will say, “*But, I’m not dead.*”

And it’s true that there is life in our flesh, *but we are dead to God.* *That is to say*, that even though humanity may have a deep longing to know God, God seems dead to us – lifeless, powerless, distant, beyond our grasp. So we settle for the hope that Mary and Martha express “*I know that he will rise again on the last day.*”

As far as belief in God’s power to give new life goes, belief that on some far distant day – the last day – Jesus will have the power to raise our bodies up to new life is for now like new life on a respirator – not completely dead, but incapable of fully living.

In the face of the trauma and loss, the reign of death and the power of evil facing Mary and Martha and each one of us in this broken, violent, indifferent, abjectly selfish, brutal, world that offers little hope short of a grave of our own, *what good is a promise that somewhere in the far distant future Jesus will raise bodies that have been moldering in graves for millennia.* I’ll tell you what critics of Christianity down south call such faith, they call it *pie in the sky by and by.* And if that’s all our faith, hope and trust in Jesus amounts to, then they are not far from wrong.

But – and this is *an absolute but* – the raising of Lazarus is about so much more than Jesus’ power to give Lazarus new life on the last day; it was about the power of Jesus’ words to give new life that day. Despite the fact that no one could even conceive, much less believe such a thing. Despite the fact that everyone in the crowd including Mary and Martha and the disciples believe with certainty that Jesus can’t bring life in the

face of death that day – *despite all that, when Jesus raises Lazarus dead, rotting flesh to new life, He does it then and there.*

Jesus does that day what even the most ardent believers in God would not even bring themselves to hope – that *Jesus' words have the power to give Lazarus a new life now.*

We need to understand something else also. Jesus gives Lazarus new life that day, but even so, *Lazarus still finds himself living that new life in this world where terror and death still reign, where selfishness controls, where greed leads people to betray those they love, where having what we want makes us completely indifferent to what others simply need to live safe, secure lives free of misery.*

If we have any doubt Lazarus is given new life in a world under the reign of death, we need only read 8 verses beyond the end of our gospel reading to hear, “*so from that day on they planned to put Jesus to death,*” The chief priests and leaders *do so for fear of deadly Roman reprisals* should Jesus stir the people up, and they begin to rebel against the Romans. Or as *Caiaphas says so articulately and with such pure reason,* “*You do not understand, it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish*” (John 11:50).

Yes, *Jesus gives Lazarus new life*, raising him in the midst of this troubled world *so that others may see him alive again, and know that in Jesus there is a new life with God.* Even so, in chapter 12 we learn living this new life from God does not come without opposition:

“*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.* ¹⁰ *So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well,* ¹¹ *for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him*”

*For those of us today who find ourselves living in the same brutally efficient and pragmatic world, where human life is cheap and disposable if need be – don't take my word, read the news, refugees confined to camps because world leaders feel no need to see their humanity if there is a political cost, parents separated from their children at our border for wanting a better life for their kids for no other reason than it serves someone's political popularity, a young man in California needlessly dies of the corona virus because he's denied treatment for not having insurance – for those of us living in this brutally efficient and pragmatic world, **Jesus and John say you can live a new life with God in Jesus, now.***

On *the last three Sundays* we have heard similarly long accounts of *Jesus with Nicodemus*, Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, *Jesus and the man born blind*. In each of these accounts Jesus offers or gives something to them, and ***in each case it is not a promise of something promised in some distant "pie in the sky by and by" future.*** When *Jesus tells Nicodemus* that he "must be born from above" to see the Kingdom of God, Jesus speaks to Nicodemus of how he, Nicodemus, in the present can know God's workings and God's Kingdom. When ***Jesus tells the Samaritan woman*** at the well that He can "give her living water," the entire *conversation is in reference to the present*, in the present moment. When *Jesus restores sight to the man born blind*, He doesn't promise it at some distant moment in the future; ***he does it then and there, and Jesus uses it as a sign of how He can make the spiritually blind see***, while those who think they see remain blind.

Jesus' words and actions ***urgently and emphatically declare over and***

over again, the life I speak of I offer now, not later. Before you can see God, know God, live with God, you must be “*born from above,*” and you can have that now. “*I can give you water gushing up to eternal life,*” today. ***Your eyes can be opened, your blindness to God cured, your true sight restored, come to me.***

Perhaps you’re thinking, “*I am baptized that’s happened to me.*”

But ***Baptism is not the new life with God;*** it is the entrance, the doorway, the moment we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit which equips us to live life with God. ***Baptism isn’t life with God; it is the invitation to and promise of life with God. We still must live that life, and to do so we must come to Jesus;*** not expect Him to come to us. Who is God after all?

Perhaps you’re saying to yourself, “*If this is so, why hasn’t happened to me?*” Maybe you’re ***too arrogant or proud.*** You believe you’re a success, and you know you can handle and manage life all on your own; so you don’t come to Jesus. Be that as it may, ***you may be able handle and manage your life, but new life is beyond everyone’s grasp without Jesus.***

Maybe you’re ***just lazy.*** You just don’t have the discipline to pursue a spiritual life beyond attending worship, when you do. Well, it’s ***like my mom used to say,*** “*I can’t promise you that if you try something it will always work, but I can absolutely promise you this – if you do nothing, nothing will happen.*”

Maybe you’re ***just too busy, too harried,*** you ***have too many obligations*** to meet to add one more thing to your life. Well, let’s be honest with ourselves, “*Do you feel alive, or just tired and empty and spent?*”

Yes, it’s true we do have to “be” in this world, but we do not

have to be “of” this world. ***We cannot accomplish this by our wits, our moral conviction, or our personal discipline, any more than Lazarus could raise himself from the dead*** by his own wits or moral integrity or self-discipline. If we desire to live a life with God today, now, if we long to know the peace that passes all understanding, if we want to find enduring hope Jesus’ promise of new life, Jesus through the power of His Word must raise us from the dead.

If we ***want a new birth, living water, our blindness to God cured, Jesus is speaking to you this morning.*** Most of all, ***if you know and feel that you are dead to God, Jesus is calling your name.*** But ***know this, new life in God is in Jesus; without Jesus it fades, leading to doubt, fear, and emptiness.*** It can never be our personal possession, resurrection life, new life in God and all that goes with it belongs to Jesus alone, but He freely gives it to anyone who comes to Him. This is why Jesus says,

“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father.”

Brothers and sisters, we find ourselves in an unnerving moment in time. Everything ground to a halt, holed up in our homes, too much time on our hands, too much isolation and too much family all at the same time. This is a liminal moment for the world, when we stand on the threshold, and in this moment decide how life will be lived when we step into the future.

I believe that God is giving us an opportunity to be raised to new life in Jesus for our own sake the sake of the life of the world. We have what we need. Jesus’ word has the power to change us, give us a new birth from above, unleash streams of living water, open our eyes blind since birth, and give us new life.

We have time to come to Jesus again, or maybe for the first time, to hear the words He speaks in the gospels, learn what Peter and Paul, James and John learned from him. A transformation will take place in us. It may be gradual, it may be a metamorphosis, but it will have to be in Jesus, with Jesus, and in the power of His words.

Start by reading a couple of chapters a day in John's gospel; then maybe the others. Then Paul to the Romans. God will open our eyes to see a new world, and when we come back together, we will be able to be for each other's visible signs of God's love mercy and grace because we will see Jesus more clearly, love Him more dearly, and follow Him more nearly. We will learn that even as we live in this world, we can choose to not be of it.

AMEN !!!