

**The Raising of Lazarus:
What Happens before you Confess Faith in Jesus Christ?
John 11:38 – 44
Ephesians 2:1, 4 - 5
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
April 16, 2017**

God identifies those whom he loves and upon whom he will show his grace

⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

We do not have time to read the entire story of the raising of Lazarus. So, to begin, we want to note verse 5. Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. There was a bond of deep friendship between Lazarus and Jesus. We are told in the gospels of Jesus staying with Mary, Martha and Lazarus on multiple occasions.

Jerusalem at this time was a good-sized city. Bethany was only a short walk, about three miles, from the city of Jerusalem. Given the size of the population, we can be sure that there were others in the area of Bethany and Jerusalem who, in addition to Lazarus, had recently died. Why did Jesus raise Lazarus and not somebody else? The answer is obvious. Jesus restores Lazarus because of his love and friendship towards Lazarus and his sisters. Jesus chose to raise Lazarus from the dead.

I know that preaching this Biblical truth makes some people uneasy. Many want to say that God loves everyone, equally. It is not God who chooses us, but we who choose God. Unfortunately, the scriptures do not teach that.

Out of all the peoples of the ancient world, God chose the Jews. They did not deserve to be chosen. They were not better, stronger, wiser or more worthy than other ancient people. They did not choose God, they were chosen by him. A similar dynamic is at work in the New Testament. God chooses his elect. Elect is a biblical word. If God's people want to be a Biblical people, they must have some understanding of the Biblical doctrine of election. In this passage, when Jesus calls out, he calls to Lazarus by name. Others would have died during this four day period. Jesus does not issue a generalized call to the dead of Jerusalem and Bethany. He makes a specific call. He calls one, whom he knows, whom he loves – Lazarus.

This then is the first thing we note from this story: God identifies those upon whom he will give his grace and mercy. The second is that the story of your faith does not begin at your conversion.

The story of your faith does not begin at your conversion

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb.

Kathleen Norris tells the story of an Orthodox priest-theologian giving a guest lecture at Yale Divinity School. During the question time afterwards, a student asked the Orthodox priest, "What can one do when one finds it impossible to affirm certain tenets of the Creed?" The priest answered, "Well, you just say it. With a little practice and effort, most can learn it by heart." The student felt misunderstood. He replied, "What am I to do if I find that I cannot affirm certain parts of the Creed, like the Virgin Birth?" The answer from the Orthodox priest was the same, "You just stand with the congregation and say it. You keep saying it. Eventually it will come to you with practice and time." Somewhat exasperated the student replied, "How can I say a Creed that I do not believe?" The priest replied, "It is not *your* Creed. It is *our* creed." The student operated on the assumption that the Creed was subject to individual scrutiny. The priest, on the other hand, saw the Creed as a treasure, passed on through time to us in the church today. We place ourselves under the Creed's guidance because of the countless believers to have gone before us have done likewise.

The three traits that set humans apart from the rest of the animal kingdom are speech, rationality and self-awareness. I want to ponder that last trait for a few moments. We humans are self-aware. We are aware of ourselves. We have the ability to think about our self, our identity, our place in this world. We can consider the meaning of our existence and ponder the significance of our moment in human history.

Usually, when we speak of our faith in God through Jesus Christ we do so, rightly, using personal pronouns. We speak of *my faith, my belief, my convictions, my trust in God*. This is as it should be. The Christian faith is more than an intellectual endeavor. There must be an element of personal inward trust, subjective conviction, and heart devotion for faith to be real. There must be a correspondence between the outward and the inward. We must believe in our hearts (inward) **and** confess with our lips (outward), as the New Testament puts it.

There is no aspect of our lives that is not affected by, corrupted by, the reality of human sinfulness. Thus, even when we speak of our personal faith in God through Jesus Christ it is possible to do so in a way that puts too much emphasis upon our self, our role, and our actions. Our self-centeredness can pop up in any context, even when speaking about God and the things of faith.

The raising of Lazarus is the seventh of the seven signs in John's gospel. In the beginning of the story, in v. 4, when Jesus is told of Lazarus' illness, Jesus declares that Lazarus' illness will be '*for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.*' God has his particular purpose in Lazarus' illness and death. God's purpose is two-fold. There is both a historical purpose and a symbolic purpose at work behind this miracle.

The historical purpose of this miracle is that it lights the fuse leading to Jesus' passion. Throughout his ministry, Jesus faithfully came to Jerusalem for the high holy days of Jewish faith: three trips per year. In addition, the gospels tell us

that he traveled to Jerusalem for some of the lesser holidays as well. Have you ever wondered why it was that on this trip to Jerusalem the crowds gathered on Palm Sunday to shout their acclamation in honor of Jesus? What was different this time? What was different was that the word of this miracle, the raising of Lazarus, had spread, moving the people of Jerusalem to come and greet him as he rode into Jerusalem that Sunday. This is the historical purpose of God at work.

There is also a spiritual message in the raising of Lazarus. It illustrates what it means to be born again.

The raising of Lazarus is an illustration of what it means to be born again.

³⁹“Take away the stone,” he said. “But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”

The raising of Lazarus is an illustration of what Jesus meant when he said that we must be born again. This miracle shows what God does, how God is at work, in the human heart, to bring faith and belief. The theological term is *regeneration*. The word “*generate*” means “*to bring into existence*.” To be *regenerated* means to be *formed or created again, to be spiritually reborn*. Lazarus is dead in his grave. His ticket has been punched. He has assumed room temperature. He gave up the ghost. His spirit has departed. He has been dead for four days. There is no turning back. His soul has checked out. Bodily decomposition has begun. The defining trait of the dead is that they lack the power to move, feel or respond. The dead do not do anything. The animating power has gone. In this way, in the raising of Lazarus, we see one who has been born again. The dead man is reborn. He is given new life. The life he had lost is restored to him.

The Biblical teaching is that, because of their disobedience and sin, Adam and Eve died spiritually. They continued to live physically. But their spiritual life, their communion in the presence of God, was lost. Further, because of their disobedience, this spiritual state of affairs has been passed on to all of their descendents. As Bob Dylan puts it poetically in one of his songs, spiritually, we are “*stone cold dead as we step out of the womb*.” We are born with physical life while spiritually we are, as the Apostle Paul puts it, “*dead in our transgressions*.”

The rescue from this state of affairs means that we must be given new life. We must be born again, spiritually. Typically, when we talk about being born again as Christians, we tend to focus upon our conversion experience. We naturally begin with our experience. We talk about the circumstances that led us to pray to receive Jesus into our heart; or when the light of our understanding came on and we believed; or when we confessed faith publicly and were baptized; or when we took the step of commitment, publicly joining a church. As I said, this is natural and normal. At the same time, the helpfulness of the story of the raising of Lazarus is that it also illustrates clearly for us what God had to do in order bring us to the point of believing in Jesus and praying that prayer of faith. for us to be born again.

Let us look at the passage with those eyes, asking these types of questions. First, God removes the barriers that exist between himself and those he has chosen.

God removes the barriers

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," he said.

Jesus knew what he was about to do. However, raising Lazarus back from the dead would be of no benefit or value if Lazarus remained locked in the tomb. There was a practical problem to be dealt with, the stone that separated Lazarus from the Lord Jesus.

Over the years, as I have listened to many people tell the story of their coming to faith in Jesus Christ, I have noticed a common pattern. Almost without exception before a person is brought to a place of belief, some type of barrier, hurdle, or impediment must be dealt with and removed. It may be a sin in the person's life. St. Augustine hesitated in coming to faith in Christ because he did not wish to give up his relationship with his mistress. For others, it may be a misunderstanding about the nature of believing faith. I have known some people who believed that they first had to *make themselves good enough* before they could place faith in Christ. It may be that they are under the grip of another religion. They must lose faith in it before they can see the beauty of Christ. This is the challenge many Muslims face before they can even consider the claims of Christ. There are all sorts of potential barriers between Jesus Christ and those whom he calls: prejudice, ignorance, intellectual questions, emotional fears, etc. and they must be addressed, dealt with and answered before a person can respond to Christ's call.

Before we come to our personal confession of faith in Jesus Christ, the barriers between ourselves and Jesus Christ must be removed. Next, God must call us to himself.

God speaks his word of calling to the one who is dead

So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

Jesus prays, out loud, more for the benefit of those who are standing around listening, than for himself. The will of God the Father and God the Son are united. Jesus knows that his heavenly Father *always* hears him. What is prayer? Prayer is the ascent of the soul to heaven. Jesus has a request of God and states it simply before God in prayer. Perhaps the key thing to underline at this point is what Jesus does not do. In our world many try to influence God through charms, shamanic ritual, superstition, incantation, spells, drugs, personal costly sacrifice, voodoo, witchcraft, bargaining, vain promises, and more. Jesus does nothing of this sort of

thing. He simply makes his request known of God. That is enough. The power of God is revealed through his prayer.

Lazarus has been chosen. The barrier has been removed. Jesus calls out. The word of God the Son goes forth. God's word is uniquely powerful. The dead cannot hear. The divide between the living and the dead is too great, too wide. But Jesus' voice can cross that divide. God's voice, God's word, can raise the dead. This leads to our next point: God's word gives new life.

God's word gives new life

The dead man came out

The miracle Jesus performs makes for an odd sounding sentence in English. *The dead man came out*. The dead, of course, do not **do** anything. Most decidedly they do not **come out**. But this dead man does. Jesus calls out and his voice, his word, crosses from this life into the next. Jesus' word has the power to enter the realm of the dead, the world of death, and command it. Lazarus is bound by the grave clothes, so his body is literally levitated out of the tomb.

In the movie **The Return of the King**, there is a scene in which Aragorn, the returning king, confronts the *King of the Dead* under the mountain. Having violated an oath in life, these dead have no rest in death. They also have no tolerance of the living. These dead do not suffer the living to enter their world of exile under the mountain. The *King of the Dead* assumes that Aragorn is simply one more foolish human to walk the pathway to his kingdom. Nevertheless, Aragorn, because he is the returning king, is the one mortal who can command the dead. He has authority in this realm.

Jesus' word has authority over the realm of death. God's word has the power to give life where death has reigned. Jesus calls and Lazarus' soul is brought back to his body. Jesus calls and Lazarus' decaying body is restored, healed, and reconstituted. What wakes Lazarus? God's word wakes him. God's call regenerates him. Lazarus does not wake himself. He cannot. It is God's free gift that gives him new life.

Lazarus is blessed by the fact that Jesus loves him, seeing him as his friend. Jesus removes the barrier that stands between him and his friend. Jesus raises his voice and calls out to Lazarus, from the realm of the living into the realm of death. And the power of Jesus' call is such that Lazarus' life is restored to him. Finally, after these four things happen, after God, through Jesus, has done these things, then Lazarus comes forth, responding to God's call, believing.

The one given new life awakens, responds to God's call, and comes forth in faith.

The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

The miracle is instantaneous. Lazarus is raised in the same dress in which he was buried. He is the same man who had died. What had been lost has now been restored to him again. Jesus tells the astonished onlookers to help Lazarus out. Remove the bandages. Tell Lazarus what has just happened. Tell him the story of what Jesus Christ has just done. Help him in adjusting to his newly restored life.

One of the blessings of scripture in our lives is that it helps push and pull us out from the habit of seeing all things with self-centered eyes. The raising of Lazarus is the greatest miracle performed by Jesus. It is the greatest miracle story in the Bible. Lazarus' role in the story is entirely passive. In the passage people worry about Lazarus, they send messages regarding Lazarus, they grieve and mourn Lazarus' death, they talk about Lazarus, and they wish things could have been different for Lazarus. Lazarus is the focal point and subject of John 11, and yet, except for a few halting steps after being released from grave clothes, Lazarus himself does not do anything or say anything.

The reason, of course, is that John the gospel writer is more interested in God's power, purpose and authority than he is in Lazarus' experience. Yes, Lazarus had to do his part. He had to walk out of that tomb. He had to leave behind the old man that was dead and buried. However, what made it possible for Lazarus to walk out of that tomb was the miraculous work that God had worked upon him while he was still dead in his tomb. God noticed Lazarus. God removed the barriers shutting Lazarus in the tomb. God called Lazarus by name. The power of God's word granted Lazarus new life, the healing of body and soul.

Do you hear Christ's call in your life? – Ephesians 2:1, 4 - 5

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world...⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved

Let me ask you, have you heard Christ's call in your life? Do you hear him calling you now? Have you heard his voice and left the darkness of the tomb behind, entering into the brightness of his presence and light? I hope so. This is my prayer for you.

One of the terrifying images of modern horror movies is that of the zombie, or the living dead. They are creatures that move and appear to have life, but they have no soul. Lacking spirit, wherever they go they bring mayhem, destruction and further death. Like so many other images from horror movies, there is an element of truth in the horror. The biblical image is that apart from Jesus Christ we are living dead. We live and move, but zombie-like we are dead in trespass and sin. We act, believing that we act rightly and wisely, but in fact we are incapable of pleasing God, bringing only further mayhem into the world.

Thankfully, God in his graciousness has not left us in this state of spiritual death. He has provided a way to break the spell, a way to experience new life, a way of resurrection. The way of resurrection is Jesus Christ himself. Jesus Christ declares this truth to Lazarus' sister, Martha. "I am the resurrection and the life."

If you believe and have confessed faith in Jesus Christ, then it is because of God's grace at work in your life. Prior to your belief, you were like Lazarus, laid out dead in that tomb. This was the state of your spirit, your soul. Into the darkness of spiritual death, God worked a miracle, giving you a new heart, and spirit, one that would love him, see the beauty of Jesus Christ, and hunger to learn more of God's word. Give thanks and praise to God for his kindness to you.

Some hearing this message may be thinking, 'Pastor Mark, what about me? I have not yet come to that place of belief in Jesus and confession of faith in him. Is there any hope for me?' Most assuredly there is. God is calling you. He has brought you to this place, at this time, to bring you to the moment of confession of faith in Christ. Turn to Jesus. Pray to God through Christ and you can begin your walk of Christian faith today. He is calling to you.

You may say, "Pastor Mark, what if I have doubts; What if there areas of Christian belief I am not yet sure of?" As the Orthodox Priest said to the Yale Divinity student, "You just stand with the congregation and say it. You keep saying it. Eventually it will come to you with practice and time."

Pray, say the Creed, believe, and ask God to make himself clear to you.

Say 'Amen' Somebody

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“But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”

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But 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.