

*In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

What was it like for Lazarus, do you suppose? Being summoned back to life?  
The process of decay being reversed, sensation returning to limbs long rigid?  
What was it like having that first thought, becoming aware of himself again?  
Hearing a familiar voice calling his name, calling him forth, calling life into him?

That's what Jesus does – he calls us forth, he calls life into us.

A short time from now, Jesus will stand outside another tomb, calling  
Mary Magdalene's name, himself called forth into life – but not merely  
human life like Lazarus is re-entering; eternal life, already here among us.

This story is the climax of the whole crazy story of Jesus' life and ministry.  
Jesus has been demonstrating the power of the Kingdom of God since the time he  
turned water into wine, through countless healings, multiplying of loaves and fish –  
now it is time for the penultimate demonstration of Kingdom power on earth.  
It's like in the movies, when the music starts to pick up intensity – something BIG  
is about to happen. Can you get bigger than healing a man born blind?  
Stay tuned... It doesn't get much bigger than death. "It's life or death."  
That's what we say about things of ultimate importance.

We spend a lot of energy, and a lot of anxiety, trying to avoid death.  
Americans have no trouble discussing their sex lives on national television,  
but when it comes to death we often bury it in flowers and soothing music.  
Better yet, we try to avoid it altogether – nipping and botoxing ourselves  
into a state of what looks like perpetual youth.  
Americans spend something staggering like \$20 billion dollars a year on cosmetic  
surgery, while real people are dying of real diseases and starvation.  
We have a vast array of medical technology designed to prolong life.  
What if we could be free of this anxiety about dying, so we could truly live?

We've looked this Lent at how we might live in balance despite the stresses and  
anxieties of our lives. When we strip back the layers on many of our anxieties,  
underlying them is a fear of death – fearing losing our life, or our loves,  
or dying without a legacy or having completed what we want to do.

If we could get to a place of peace about our eventual death in this life,  
we might take the air out of other anxieties. That's not a new thought –  
St. Francis said it: Once you have faced the first death, the second is easy.  
And what is the first death? The loss of all the stuff and attributes and affirmations  
and accomplishments that make us feel worthy of our life.  
It's how we fill in this sentence, "If I could just [    ], I'd die happy."

One goal of the life of faith is to know that any moment, we could die happy.  
Many people who've had near-death experiences say is, "I no longer fear death."  
We can get to that place without having to endure medical trauma or coma.  
We get there by allowing the attachments that cause us anxiety to die.  
To love the things of this life without clinging to them –  
that's the high wire act of faith we're called to perfect. That's the first death.  
And we can get there by cultivating our trust in the God of life.

It's not easy for us to see physical death as occasion for Good News, especially  
when we see a gap between what God can do, and what God seems to do.  
We experience death as loss, untimely.  
We can only see good news in death if we look at it from Jesus' perspective.  
Mary, Martha – they could experience Lazarus' illness only as bad news.  
Jesus did not hurry to Lazarus' side, because he knew what was going to happen.  
Can we, knowing what we know, by faith, begin to have that kind of vision?

We have this kind of faith in nature. Even as I look out on the dead trees in my yard,  
I have no doubt they will bud and leave yet again. I have faith there.  
Why not have this faith in God, who has also demonstrated to us time and again  
his power and faithfulness and love?  
Why not trust God for new life when a job ends, a sale falls through,  
when a marriage dies, when a lifelong dream seems never to come to pass?  
Why not trust God when we're hopeless and depressed, as dry as those  
bones in the desert that God blew new breath into in Ezekiel's vision?  
Why not trust God when even catastrophic storms come,  
when children are starving, when new wars break out all the time,  
when humans find new and more horrific ways to destroy each other?  
Is it sick to trust God for new life in the face of death?  
No... but it sure is hard. Even Jesus felt it in his very guts, moved to his core.

We want the Lazarus miracle, death delayed, death defied.

But God is in the business of bringing about much deeper life, which will not end.

Can we believe in life bigger than we ever thought possible?

Can we believe in this church filled with people brought back to life by God's spirit?

Lazarus is revived to this life. Jesus is resurrected for eternal life.

There is a difference.

But right here, at Lazarus' tomb, Jesus writes the death sentence on death itself.

Right here he says, "Look. There is good news here, even at the grave!

Look what God can do!"

Lazarus was deader than dead. Four days rotting dead. And Jesus gave him life.

Those bones in the vision Ezekiel saw in the desert were deader than dead –

no flesh, no sinews, no breath.

And the Spirit of God remade them and gave them new life – new life to a community that was all but dead after conquest and years of exile from their home.

Parts of you may feel deader than dead, lost, lonely, broken, demoralized.

But deader than dead is not a bad place for Christians to be.

Because we proclaim that for us, death is the threshold to life –

life that cannot be contained, cannot be suppressed, cannot wither away.

Jesus was deader than dead after they nailed him to a cross and murdered him.

He was sealed in a tomb, on the inside this time. Did death have the last word?

Next Sunday we will enter our annual deep, week-long contemplation of death and life. This is a good time to ask these questions and take them into prayer.

If it feels to you like death still has the upper hand, still wins – that's something to talk with God about, to question and see where answers might emerge.

It helps if we learn to train our eyes on where life is.

And friends, life is emerging from death all around us, with every addict who finally

goes into recovery, every child who finally gets a chance at a decent education,

every family that finally gets a home, every refugee who finally arrives in safety.

Life emerges as Jesus calls us out of despair into hope, out of death into life.

We have already begun our forever life, friends, united with Jesus in baptism.

God's life is already in us, here and now, not only then and later.

As we learn to dwell in that life, we have life to share with others.

As we hear Jesus call us forth, we learn to be his voice calling others into life.

At what tomb will you call forth life this week? Amen.

**John 11:1-44**

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.

So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death.

No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."

Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, **he stayed where he was two more days.**

Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?"

Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight?"

A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light.

It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light."

After he had said this, he went on to tell them,

"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better."

Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, **and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.** But let us go to him."

Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples,

"Let us also go, that we may die with him."

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "**if you had been here**, my brother would not have died.

But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

Jesus said to her, "**Your brother will rise again.**"

Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

Jesus said to her, "**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.**

Do you believe this?"

"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside.

"The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you."

When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him.

Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, **if you had been here, my brother would not have died.**"

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, **he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.**

"Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

But some of them said,

"Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

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.

"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."

*It's no longer convenient to see your handiwork now. It's too late.*

Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone.

Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me.

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."

When he had said this, **Jesus called in a loud voice**, "Lazarus, come out!"

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."

**Ezekiel 37:1-14**

**1** The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. **2** He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. **3** He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

I said, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know."

**4** Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! **5** This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath [a] enter you, and you will come to life. **6** I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.' "

**7** So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. **8** I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

**9** Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.' " **10** So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

**11** Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' **12** Therefore prophecy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. **13** Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. **14** I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.' "