

Lazarus was not sleeping. He wasn't stunned. He wasn't resting, or pining for the fjords. Lazarus was stone dead. He was no more. He'd ceased to be. He was a stiff, bereft of life; his metabolic processes were a matter of interest only to historians. He'd shuffled off his mortal coil, run down the curtain, and joined the choir invisible. He was an ex-Lazarus.

And that's just how Jesus wanted it. Not in and of itself, of course. Death is never God's will, and Jesus counted Lazarus as a good friend, but the death of Lazarus represented an opportunity to accomplish something more important than getting his friend back. The deader Lazarus was, the greater the opportunity to increase the community's faith in Jesus. Jesus had already performed miraculous healings, and still, most people did not believe, or were too tentative in their faith. The faith of his own closest disciples was still too weak for the more difficult days that lay immediately ahead.

For all we know, Lazarus might have preferred to stay dead. Some have speculated that leaving whatever peace he might have found in the grave, or the act of crossing back from death to life, or the realization that someday he would have to endure dying all over again, would have put him off the idea of returning to life. But increasing the faith of his disciples and the other witnesses was more important than acceding to a dead man's hypothetical wishes. And Jesus understood that positive change is worth ruffling some feathers to achieve. Living feathers, anyway. Because this miracle, strictly speaking, isn't about Lazarus, for the same reason the Gospel isn't about Lazarus, or Mary and Martha, or the religious authorities. It's all about Jesus, and how faith changes us at the deepest levels.

In raising Lazarus, and raising him the way he did, Jesus revealed several important things about God. Jesus showed us that God acts with God's timing, not the timing we might like. Mary and Martha would have liked Jesus to show up on their schedule, but no. As a Christian Arab from Galilee I once met put it, "Us men from Galilee do not make appointments, we make appearances."

Jesus also showed us that when God wants us to know something, nothing will stand in God's way. Jesus showed us that we can be his friends, that he will hear our prayers. Jesus certainly showed us that God is sovereign over life and death, although the glory of the raising of Lazarus is far outshone by that of the resurrection, which it foreshadows. But the most exciting thing Jesus shows us about God is how God's compassion is so profound and proactive as to change lives in unpredictable ways.

I said lives, plural, because the point of this story is not the restoration of Lazarus's life. Jesus could have raised, say, John the Baptist, who was not just a friend, but family, but

he did not. Jesus himself tells us the point of raising Lazarus: "...so that they may believe that you sent me." This story is not about the life of one man, but how faith changes the way all of us live our lives.

Near the beginning of the story, Jesus says, "This illness does not lead to death," though some of you may remember the pithy King James translation, "This sickness is not unto death." Either way, that statement deserves careful attention. On a literal level, it is both true and false. We could take it along with Jesus's statement that he would "awaken" Lazarus as Jesus "calling his shot," expressing his confidence that he would be able to restore Lazarus to life. But I agree with Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard that there is a deeper meaning to these words.

For a faithful Christian, no physical disease is a "sickness unto death," in the sense that we know we will enjoy eternal life in heaven. So why would Jesus bother saying something that would go over his disciples' heads at the time, only to be obvious to his followers later? Because, Kierkegaard argues, there *is* a "sickness unto death," from which Jesus needs to distinguish biological mortality, and it is one that many of us have had a brush with. That sickness is called despair, although not in the common sense of feeling hopeless, but rather in a particular existential sense of being utterly cut off from God, who is ultimately our only hope.

That existential understanding of sin as a state of separation, like being lost, is at odds with the more common understanding of sins as particular acts or omissions, but it sheds new light on why Jesus wept. Yes, he absolutely does empathize with human grief, but the abundant emotional despair on display might also remind Jesus of the separation between God and humanity that he was there to resolve, making Jesus weep with existential compassion for all humanity.

Jesus's response is profoundly telling. Or rather, showing. Jesus does not judge, condemn, or berate the mourners; he gives them greater hope than their understanding of the world ever could by giving them a glimpse of God in his own divinity. Humanity said, "OK, that's it!" God said, "No, that's just the beginning." The raising of Lazarus leads to the death of Jesus, which leads to new life for all, glorifying God far more than the raising of any individual, even Jesus.

The faith we have from the signs Jesus did gives us durable hope that Jesus is there for us, and indeed with us, in the darkest depths of our lives, just as he was there for his friend at his grave. He also invited the eyewitnesses to participate in the miracle. I don't think this part of the story gets enough attention. Jesus could have unbound Lazarus himself, or made the bindings vanish, or given Lazarus the strength to break them

himself. So we see that God longs for us to respond to God's love with our own love of God and neighbor, and for us to express that love boldly and faithfully, in ways that make sense in our particular circumstances.

Our church's financial crisis might have us feeling like we're in existential despair, like the weeping mourners, or even Lazarus himself. And while we certainly are concerned about the situation, your parish leadership is responding faithfully, rather than fearfully, in both short-term and long-term ways. We are working simultaneously to find opportunities to make progress on the budget we have, to find a qualified CPA with no ties to the parish to help us develop a sustainable budget, and to create a new vision for our parish. Best of all, more and more parishioners are increasing their giving. For all of this, I offer my deep gratitude.

Therefore, if there is an analogy to be made, our role is more like that of Mary and Martha, or whoever else obeyed Jesus's command to "Unbind him, and let him go." Rather than unbinding a man, though, as he always does, Jesus calls us to unbind our hearts from fear and despair, and our minds from what seems familiar or safe. For Jesus is not merely an historical figure nor a silent companion, but a powerful, active presence with a discrete and discernible will, doing as much for us as we will allow him to do. That is why it is so important to believe, why Jesus and his followers have gone to such great lengths to convince us of who Jesus is. Not because our opinions will get us into heaven someday, but because our faith will let us participate in the life, and will, and power of Christ *right now*.

We live, and we live in hope that God is not done bringing life out of death, but we are wise to remember that bringing life out of death is inherently surprising. The Monty Python sketch I quoted at the beginning of this sermon, despite its initial fixation on death, ends quite unexpectedly, with an invitation that comes out of the blue, but is joyfully received. We can respond to God's love and power with our own faithfulness in the face of hard truths, and openness to new possibilities. The future of our parish is far from clear, and while change is inevitable, what I am seeing and hearing is bringing me from despair to hope.

God's grace will let us follow Christ's example of dauntless courage. We can get through this crisis with love and grace because we know that Christ will remain faithful to us, no matter what. So pray that the same Christ will speak to us, comfort us, heal and strengthen us, revive our souls, unbind our hearts and minds, and make us ready to meet him, whenever and however he may come.