

Sermon: "So Loud You Can Wake the Dead"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
March 13, 2005

John 11:1-50

[1] Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. [2] Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. [3] So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." [4] But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." [5] Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, [6] after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

[7] Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." [8] The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" [9] Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. [10] But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." [11] After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." [12] The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." [13] Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. [14] Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. [15] For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." [16] Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

[17] When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. [18] Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, [19] and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. [20] When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. [21] Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. [22] But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." [23] Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." [24] Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." [25] Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, [26] and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" [27] She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

[28] When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." [29] And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. [30] Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. [31] The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. [32] When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." [33] When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. [34] He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." [35] Jesus began to weep. [36] So the Jews said, "See how he loved

him!" [37] But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

[38] Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. [39] Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." [40] Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" [41] So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. [42] I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." [43] When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" [44] The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

[45] Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. [46] But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. [47] So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. [48] If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." [49] But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! [50] You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." John 11:1-50 (NRSV)

LOUD ENOUGH TO WAKE THE DEAD

"That noise is loud enough to wake the dead."

I'm sure you've heard that phrase before. I often say that about the subwoofer in my neighbor's car. That's just a saying. We really don't believe that anything is that loud.

Although, when it comes to my neighbor's car, I sometimes wonder.

But, today's story from the gospel of John suggests that there is One who can speak loud enough to raise the dead, and that someone, of course, is Jesus.

Did you notice why Jesus raised his voice before calling Lazarus from the grave? Jesus wanted everyone who witnessed this event to believe in Him.

So Jesus shouted at the top of his lungs, "Lazarus, come out!" And once again something happened that had never happened before. A man who had been dead four days walked out of the tomb ... still wearing his grave clothes.

MIRACLES ARE SIGNS OF SOMETHING GREATER

In the gospel of John, the miracles of Jesus are signs that he is someone special. He turns water into wine. He feeds five thousand with only five loaves and two small fish. He heals a man who was blind from birth. In all these miracles there are hints of things to come, foreshadowing of the events of Holy Week.

And now we have the piece de résistance when it comes to miracles (at least to this point), a man dead four days is resuscitated. The

resuscitation of Lazarus cannot be attributed to any other factor but the power of God in Jesus.

Last week we talked about Jesus healing a man who was blind from birth. No one had ever been able to do that before Jesus. But, this was an even greater sign. If healing a man who was blind from birth seemed like a miracle, raising the dead was downright frightening.

You see, Lent, the season of contemplation and repentance, is almost over now, and there are hints in our Scripture lessons of things to come. The stone is rolled away. And many who doubt (like "doubting" Thomas who makes a cameo appearance in our lesson) are given reason to believe.

When the shout of Jesus wakes the dead, the crowds increase. Many more Jews now believe in Jesus because of what He has done.

A SHOUT THAT DISTURBS THE PEACE

But, not everyone is happy with this one who can shout loud enough to raise the dead. For some it is a noise that will disturb the peace.

Once again, it is the religious leaders who feel threatened by such power. When they learn about what Jesus is doing they say,

"If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." (John 11:48)

This sign was just too great to ignore. The high priest realizes that this is about more than just the miracles of one man. It is about the survival of their nation. If they let Jesus continue to do these things, it will whip up Messianic fervor. The people will be encouraged to revolt against the Romans.

And the religious leaders knew what would happen if the people did that. The Romans were not known for their patience with a rebellious nation like Israel. This time there would be nothing left. A man who speaks loud enough to wake the dead is disturbing the peace. He is dangerous. He must be silenced for the good of society.

And so, the Scripture tells us, "From that day on they planned to put him to death."

MIRACLES MISUNDERSTOOD

I have a great deal of sympathy for the dilemma of the Pharisees. Potentially, Jesus did pose a political and a religious threat.

Some of you will remember that when Jesus miraculously fed a crowd of over 5,000 the people wanted to make him king by force. How much more would they want to do this now that Jesus had raised the dead?

The people understood the power of the miracle, but they didn't understand the meaning. For them it was a sign that they now had a leader who had the power to lead them in a military victory.

The leaders understood the danger of one person having that much influence. In recent years we have seen the power of religion to incite

incredible violence. The one who believes in resurrection can bring great disruption to the settled ways of society.

Just witness the events of September 11, 2001 if you think the Pharisees didn't have a point. That's why those men were willing to fly the planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. They believed (however misguided) in a resurrection, a resurrection that would be a reward for their willingness to attack the enemies of God.

Do you think that the leaders of our country would hesitate to sacrifice the life of one person, if they thought the fate of our nation was at stake? Of course they would. They would be willing to sacrifice many people for the good of our country.

But, we have also learned that sometimes it is not always easy to predict who is a Savior and who is a demon. Sometimes, innocent people are terribly wronged by this way of thinking.

Such was the case with Jesus. In the end, the people He loved and wished to save killed him. And they did it out of fear. The one who can shout loud enough to wake the dead can be a very frightening person.

FROM RESUSCITATION TO RESURRECTION

Jesus used this resuscitation of a dead man as a sign of an even greater miracle, a miracle called resurrection.

Did you notice that when I refer to the return of Lazarus from the dead I call it resuscitation and not resurrection? Lazarus was raised from the dead, but he would not live forever. He would face death on another day.

Jesus, on the other hand, would be raised from the dead forever. Once again a stone would be rolled away, but this time it wouldn't be rolled away by people in the crowd. It would be rolled away by the very power of God.

Resurrection was beyond the imagination of the people, their leaders, or even Jesus' own disciples. How could they have known? Nothing like this had ever happened before. It was a totally unique event.

But, His resurrection would change everything, forever. The world as we know it came to a dead stop when Jesus was raised. Heaven and earth were connected. The death and resurrection of Jesus unleashed a power in the world that continues to amaze and befuddle us.

HARD TO BELIEVE

Last week we talked about the unwillingness of modern men and women to even entertain the idea that the power of God, a miracle, might come into their lives. People everywhere become suspicious if you use the word miracle.

When I went to seminary, I took an introductory course in the Old Testament. We spent quite a lot of time talking about the Exodus. The newly freed Hebrews followed Moses into the desert, and they ran out of food. They panicked. Where would they get food in that God-forsaken place? They would die of starvation.

But, Moses prayed to God and wonder of wonders a sweet, flaky substance appeared on the ground the next morning. The people called it "manna." They found that they could make it into bread, and they survived by eating this miracle food.

That was the story as we learned it in Sunday school, but our professor said that we shouldn't be too quick to think of this as a miracle.

Yes, we had never seen manna appear on the red clay of Georgia, but not so in the Near East ... apparently that is one weird place, for, according to our professor, there was a species of beetle in that part of the world that secreted a substance. And that substance, when it is dry, has a milky white appearance.

And if you tasted it (who would ever want to do that?), but if you got up the nerve to taste it, it would have a distinctly sweet taste.

I don't know about you, but I think it's an even greater miracle if the Hebrews managed to live forty years in the wilderness eating nothing but bug droppings!

But, there is a reason that we search so hard for reasons to explain away the stories of the Bible. We modern people have a bias against the miraculous ... even at the seminary where they train preachers. We want any explanation except the one that the Bible gives.

There is a certain cold comfort in knowing a scientific explanation for what we poor dummies (and those primitive Jews) thought was a miracle. Someone says,
"I have witnessed a miracle."

And we reply,
"In Kissimmee? Give me a break! Miracles don't happen here. Miracles only happened in ancient Palestine! And even then we're not so sure. Maybe it was just an overactive beetle population!"

Of course the people then were not all that different from people now. Some miracles were just not possible. Did you notice what they said to Jesus when he came into to town?

"It's a shame you couldn't have come earlier, maybe you could have healed him.

But, now it's too late. Lazarus is dead.
Case closed. Someone needs to call in the grief counselors.

The time for faith healing is over."

A MIRACLE TOO BIG TO DENY?

But, then something happens that is just too miraculous to explain away. If a man has been in the grave four days and comes walking out like a character from one of those "Return of the Mummy" movies, you know that something strange is afoot.

People begin to believe that anything is possible, even something called life eternal.

And when people begin to believe that, then the world is in for some big changes.

In another gospel (Luke 16:19-31), there's a story about another Lazarus. He dies of sickness, poverty and hunger. And there's a rich man who has never been a sick a day in his life dies.

When they get to the afterlife the tables are turned. The rich man finds himself in hell and Lazarus is in the bosom of Father Abraham (we assume) in heaven.

The rich man pleads with Abraham, "Please let me go back and warn all my self-satisfied rich relatives that this is how things work out for those who are in investment banking. Maybe I can get them to straighten up and fly right."

But, Abraham answers, "Don't bet on it. They didn't listen to Moses. Even if someone would come back from the dead they wouldn't listen."

That's just a story that Jesus told. But, it turns out to be true. A man does come back from the dead, a man named Lazarus. He is a living sign that Jesus is who he says he is. And how do the powers that be react to this? "Let's kill him and let's kill Jesus."

THE POLITICS OF JESUS

The Pharisees were right about Jesus in a way. There were political and social ramifications to his miraculous actions. They just couldn't imagine someone with such radically different political and social ideas. It is still hard for people to imagine.

Jim Wallis, the editor of the progressive Christian magazine, "Sojourners" has written a book with a very intriguing title, "The Politics of Jesus: Why the Right is Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It."

In that book he says that a separation of church and state in this country doesn't mean that Christians should withdraw from the political arena. Instead, he suggests that we have a right and a duty to be politically active as a result of what our faith teaches.

In his own life that has led him on a rather curious political path. He is conservative about right to life issues, being (as he put it) one of the few Democrats in the country who is pro-life. He advised President Bush on his faith based initiative program. And yet, he was radically against the war in Iraq and continues to speak out forcefully against it.

No one knows quite what to make of Wallis. In a town like Washington, a place based upon political expediency, he insists on making decisions based upon faith in Jesus.

But, that's what happens when you believe in the power of God in Christ. When you've seen a resurrection, His politics become your politics. His standards of morality become your standards of morality.

Some miracles are so big that they mess everything up. People start believing in a compassionate, loving God, and fear doesn't control them any more. God does.

DO YOU BELIEVE IN MIRACLES?

What about you? Do you believe in the miracle of miracles, that Jesus has the power to raise the dead, that Jesus has the power to raise you from the dead? Do you believe that the last enemy, death, will be defeated by the power of God in Christ?

(I Corinthians 15:26)

That really is the essential question for all of us. If we believe that God was in Christ, that his resurrection is a foreshadowing of even more to come, then what on earth do we have to fear? As Paul put it in his letter to the Romans, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

UNBIND HIM

In our lesson for today, after Jesus shouts loud enough to raise the dead, and He also shouts out concerning Lazarus, "Unbind him. Let him go."

Jesus was shouting about Lazarus and his grave clothes, but I have to wonder if He was also shouting about all the dead and dying people that He is calling forth from death. Even today Jesus shouts, "Unbind them. Let them go."

And how many times has it happened just as Jesus said. Every time I officiate at a funeral words are read from this passage. These particular words are words that Jesus first spoke to a woman named Martha.

Martha was a lot like us. She was a practical woman who knew the facts of life and death. She told Jesus,

"If only you had been here, things would have been different."

And Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. "

John 11:25-26 (NRSV)

And then Jesus asked her a question, "Do you believe this?"

Martha said, "I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God coming into the world."

The question is a personal one, a question that Jesus still also asks each one of us in our trial. "Do you believe this? Do you believe that I am the Son of God? Can you dare to trust me when the tears are streaming down your face, and all that you know and love seems to have come to an end? Do you believe that much?"

There is no way to know ahead of time what our answer will be. Our true answer can only be given during the time of trial, when everything goes wrong, and the only thing we can do is either turn toward or turn away from Jesus.

Sometimes I have seen unbelievers become believers in Jesus when they hear him shout at the time of death. Sometimes I have seen faithful church members lose faith and seemingly fall away in the face of the final test.

But, I still have hope for us all. I have hope even when there seems to be nothing to hope for. The Man who can shout loud enough to wake the dead has that kind of effect on people.

LIFE ALWAYS HAS MEANING

There was an article about Pope John Paul the third in the paper this past week. It was written by someone from the Vatican who was explaining why the Pope didn't resign, even though Canon Law would allow for such a thing. Some of his explanations I didn't find very convincing, but one touched me deeply.

He said that as the Pope has tried to continue even in the midst of great suffering, he has been a great source of strength and comfort to others who suffer as well. His willingness to soldier on despite his limitations speaks volumes about his belief in the resurrection. He is saying through his person that life always has meaning because life with Jesus is eternal.

This is the kind of hope that I want to have. That kind of hope can unbind even the most deadly circumstance, that kind of hope can give us courage to face the darkest hour.

Jesus would need that kind of courage as He strode toward Jerusalem. His enemies waited for the opportunity to kill him.

But, they did not have as great an advantage as they thought. They were about to hear a shout that will be even louder than the one that raised Lazarus. The Spirit of the Risen Christ is about to be unleashed in the world where not even the religious leaders or the powerful Roman government will be able to do anything about it.

LISTEN FOR THE SHOUT OF RESURRECTION

These next few weeks I want you to listen for that shout of resurrection in your own lives. Listen for Jesus saying in some new way,

"I am the resurrection and the life."
Believe Him. Walk with Him.

You may find that your old grave clothes are no longer appropriate when you travel with Jesus. You may find that crucifixion leads to something quite unexpected, that even the greatest suffering can be overcome and redeemed by the power of God.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN