

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
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3/9/08

John 11:1-45 (NRSV)

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. </ FONT>

[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.

## TIME CHANGE

Today in the wee hours of the morning the time changed. We all got one hour less sleep last night. In fact I suspect that quite a few will be reading this line from the sermon online at our website because they came to the second service just as the postlude was being played!

I reminded the Wednesday Bible study about daylight savings time, and we had a twenty minute discussion about who was to blame for this terrible intrusion on our sleep. We couldn't figure out who to blame, but we do think that the TV show Sixty Minutes should put their best investigative reporters on the case.

We're sleepy, and we're not going to take it any more.

But, as inconvenient as daylight savings time might be for you, I want you to think about what a problem it presents for me. How would you like to preach to a congregation that has had one less hour of sleep? Yawns are contagious. Someone once remarked wryly that preaching is the fine art of talking during someone else's sleep. Sometimes I wonder if that's not true.

And when I see yawns out there I am reminded of what the great theologian Karl Barth said about preaching. He wrote,

Preachers must not be boring. [But] To a large extent the pastor and boredom are synonymous concepts. Listeners often think that they have heard already what is being said in the pulpit.

Barth continues, Against boredom the only defense is being biblical. Holy scripture has so much that is new and exciting to tell us that listeners cannot even think about dropping off to sleep.

Actually, Karl I hate to tell you this, but I have seen listeners drop off to sleep during the most rousing biblical sermons. Most recently we watched as Bill Clinton fell asleep in a pulpit chair at the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church. He did this as Martin Luther King's son was speaking during the Martin Luther King holiday!

One of our members told me about something that happened in a former church. A friend introduced a visiting preacher who began a sermon on that famous passage from Ezekiel 37, the valley of the dry bones. Now if you can't preach a rousing sermon on that passage you may as well hang it up.

But, apparently the preacher didn't cut the mustard. The friend fell asleep in full view of the congregation and slept all the way through the sermon! When they asked him about it after the service he nonchalantly said, I've heard the Ezekiel sermon before.

So, this morning I not only need a story that is biblical; I also need a story that is new and exciting, a story you haven't heard before.

### LUCKY'S STORY

I think that I have such a story. It's a story from the Bible, but it's one that doesn't appear in the lectionary so it's probably new for most of you. It comes from the book of Acts, the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter, verses 7-12 so don't think that I'm making this stuff up just because you're sleepy today!

Paul was preaching and teaching in an upper room in Philippi. They didn't have air conditioning back then so with all the candles burning the room was getting hot and the hour was getting late. But, Paul kept on preaching. (That's just like a preacher isn't it?)

A young man named Eutychus was sitting in the window. And as the Apostle droned on Eutychus fell into a deep sleep. He tumbled out the window, fell three floors and when the ushers rushed down to pick him up, he was dead.

Now if that doesn't wake you up on the first Sunday in daylight savings time; I don't know what will. Sleeping in church can have fatal consequences. Just look what happened to poor Eutychus. By the way, do you know what that name Eutychus means? His name means Lucky! He doesn't sound like such a lucky guy to me.

### WAKING A SLEEPING CHURCH

The tragic story of young Lucky does represent a problem that I see in the church today. The church has become a place of slumber. The church has become a place where death is expected.

But, that's not what created the church. The church was created when life emerged unexpectedly from a cross and a tomb. The church is not a place to get comfortable and bed down with what we already know and believe. The church is that place where we expect the unexpected. The church is that place where it's never over until God says it's over.

If we go to sleep during the Ezekiel sermon then we haven't really heard the message. Even dry bones can wake up and hear the preaching when the Spirit of God in Christ is at work. Church is the place where even the sleepest among us wake up. Church is the place of resurrection.

Lately we in the church have been turning up the volume. I assume we've done it to wake up the faithful. We've replaced the staid old hymns with rock and roll, and the preachers instead of standing behind a pulpit now pace up and down like caged lions.

Maybe we need to change. Maybe we need to turn up the volume and wake up all these sleeping church members.

Maybe we need to make a noise that will wake the dead. That's biblical you know.

## JESUS TURNS UP THE VOLUME

Did you notice that in today's lesson Jesus turns up the volume? In our Scripture lesson from John we read that Jesus cried out in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out!

Now Lazarus had been dead and buried for four days. He wasn't going to wake up even if Mick Jagger, Keith Richards and the Rolling Stones decided to do a concert outside his tomb.

Martha and Mary and their Jewish friends all said as much. They said, Lord, if only you could have come sooner. But, now it's too late. You were able to heal the blind man, but unfortunately no one can raise the dead. Only God can do that.

That was, of course, the point of this miracle, this sign as John calls it. Jesus not only said what only God could say; Jesus now does what only God can do. He preaches to the dead in a loud voice, and the dead listen!

The friends of Lazarus had gathered to mourn, but like Ezekiel before him Jesus had a sermon that would wake the dead. He had them roll the stone away from the cave like tomb, and he shouted in a loud voice for Lazarus to come out.

It happened. Lazarus staggered out of the tomb bound up like a mummy, and Jesus ordered the people to unbind him. That got their attention. That woke them up. The resurrection of the dead will wake up a congregation even on the Sunday when we start daylight savings time!

## THE DANGEROUS RESURRECTION

But, even a resurrection is not enough to convince some people. The crowds that followed Jesus got bigger after Lazarus was raised. Yet some saw danger instead of hope.

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, what did the religious leaders see? They saw someone who had broken their rules, someone who had healed on the Sabbath.

Now Lazarus has been raised from the dead, and what do the religious leaders see? They see a threat to national security.

In the next section of Scripture after our lesson for today, the religious bigwigs get together, and their leader says, 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.

In other words, they are saying that this sign is just too big to ignore. If we continue to let Jesus do these things it will whip up Messianic fervor that won't be stopped. The people will be encouraged to revolt against the Romans.

The religious leaders had a point. Jesus might know that his kingdom was not of this world, but the people who followed him didn't know.

Remember that story when Jesus miraculously fed a crowd of over 5,000? The crowd responded by trying to make Jesus become king by force. What do you think might happen now that Jesus has raised the dead? This miracle man would soon become a political force, and that would be dangerous.

And the Romans were not known for their patience. They would deal harshly with a rebellious nation like Israel. One more failed Messiah might bring down the whole country. A man who speaks loud enough to wake the dead is also disturbing the peace. He is dangerous. He must be silenced.

And so the Scripture tells us that from that day on they planned to put him to death. Do you think 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? They wouldn't hesitate for a minute.

But, trampling on the rights of the individual because of fear is never a good idea. In this case we know that the man they feared was in fact not a danger to their country but a savior, a savior not only for their country but a savior for the world.

And yet in the end the very people he loved and desired to save ended up killing him. They killed him because he dared to resurrect the dead and resurrect the hopes of a nation.

## A SIGN

It's important to note that in the gospel of John the resurrection is seen as a sign. It is a pointer toward a greater reality. What is that greater reality? Is it the coming of the military Messiah who would lead his people in a great victory? That's what the religious leaders feared.

But, this story points the reader in a different direction. The raising of Lazarus is a foreshadowing of an even greater resurrection. As the stone is rolled away this day by Jesus, the stone will be rolled away from the place where they will lay the crucified Jesus. As Lazarus rose from the dead to die again another day, Jesus rose from the dead to die no more.

The signs in John's gospel grow in scope and power. Jesus turns water into wine. He then feeds five thousand with only five loaves and two small fish. He heals a man who was blind from birth. And now he raises the dead.

As the signs increase in power, the cross looms ever closer. Lent, the season of contemplation and repentance is almost over, and there are hints in our Scripture lesson of the events to come.

Do we believe in this sign of things to come? Do we believe in the possibility of resurrection? Do we believe that hope does not end even with death, that in Jesus we have hope for life eternal?

Do we believe that in life and in death we belong to God? Do we believe that the creator of heaven and earth can recreate us in a new and wonderful way in that kingdom that comes?

Resurrection is a hard miracle to believe. We would like to believe, but it is hard for us to get beyond our fears. It is hard for us to stand in front of the tomb and believe that there is hope for life beyond this life. But, if we believe that, if we believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life and that those who believe in him will never die, then a lot of the things that hold us back in this life will lose their power over us.

## THE RESURRECTED COMMUNITY

After Jesus shouts and Lazarus wakes up from the sleep of death, Jesus tells the people to do something else for Lazarus. Unbind him. Cut off his grave clothes. I take that as clue for those of us who would be a community of faith that is based on the resurrection.

It is our job to unbind all the dead and dying. These are the ones whom Jesus calls to new life.

Do you remember that story about Paul and the unlucky boy named Lucky who fell to his death when the sermon got too long? Well, here's the rest of the story. It seems that Paul calmly went downstairs; picked the boy up and said don't worry; now the boy is alive. And he was.

Then Paul went back upstairs and proceeded to preach to dawn! Can't you just hear how people might have described that service? How did things go last night? Oh, they went okay. Paul preached a bit too long and Lucky fell asleep. He also fell out a third story window.

What happened?

Oh, you know that Paul. He just raised him from the dead and then he kept on preaching.

It was just another day in the life of a community based on resurrection power.

We too live in a community based upon the power of resurrection. We too live in a community that stands defiantly at the entrance to the tomb and proclaims the words of Jesus, I am the resurrection and the life.

You may have noticed. Every time someone dies among us we do this.

Jesus asked Martha if she believed that he had the power to raise the dead, and Martha said yes. She said, I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God come into the world.

Every time we stand at the tomb, every time we are tempted to give up as the tears stream down our face, we are reminded of this story. We have a Lord who cares for us. We have a Lord who cares so much that he even cries with us in our sorrow.

But, he does more than empathize with our pain. He teaches us to shout at the graveside. He teaches us to shout a word of defiance and hope. The power of sin and death no longer bind us. In Jesus a hope has been unleashed on this world that is stronger than any power to divide or hurt us.

Sometimes someone falls three stories onto their head, and we all wake up. The hour is late and the preacher is droning on and on, but at the moment of crisis we realize that our worship is about more than the fine points of theological debate.

It is about life and death. It is about a God who loves us so much that he loosens the bonds of fear. It is about a God who loves us so much that he cries for us. It is about a God who loves us so much that he dies for us.

It is about a God who can shout so loud that he can wake up those who sleep even those who sleep the very deep sleep of death itself.

## LAZARUS LAUGHED

At Bible study this past week someone said that she would like to know what Lazarus said and did after he had been raised from the dead. Even though John's story is more complete than the other gospels we don't learn this.

But, I found out this week that there was a play that even opened on Broadway for a few weeks that tackled this very issue. The play was written by Eugene O'Neill, and it was entitled, Lazarus Laughed. After they cut the grave clothes off of Lazarus he begins to laugh, a soft gentle laugh. He embraces Jesus, and then he embraces his family.

Lazarus comes back to Bethany and as you might guess the whole town wants to know. Lazarus, what was it like? What lies on the other side of the boundary that none of us have crossed? Lazarus replied, There is no death really. There is only life. There is only God. There is only incredible joy.

He continues, The One that meets us there is the same generosity that gave us our lives in the beginning, the One who gave us our birth. Not because we deserved it but because that generous One wanted us to be and therefore there is nothing to fear in the next realm.

The grave is as empty as a doorway is empty. It is a portal through which we move into greater and finer life. Therefore, there is nothing to fear. Our great agenda is to learn to accept, to learn to trust. We are put here to learn to love more fully. There is only life. There is no death."

And with that his laughter began to fill the room.

Lazarus goes back to his old life, but he is a changed man. He's not as anxious. He laughs more. In fact his home is known as the House of Laughter. Night after night the people of Bethany hear singing and dancing.

And the laughter of Lazarus begins to rub off on the people of Bethany. They too become less anxious. A profound joy settles over this little community because they have learned that there is nothing to fear.

But, there are some who do not like the change that see in Bethany. The Romans rule by intimidation and fear. There is entirely too much frivolity in Bethany so Lazarus is called on the carpet before the Roman rulers. In fact, in the play they finally end up taking him to Rome to face Caesar, the highest authority in the land.

Caesar orders Lazarus to stop his laughter. Caesar says, "You either stop laughing or I'm going to have you put to death." And Lazarus laughed.

In a sense this tells the truth about what God has done in Christ. The resurrection is divine laughter in the face of the worst that the world can do. If you take away the ultimate threat, life here and now changes. There is more joy. There is more laughter. There is less anxiety.

And even the most powerful dictator becomes a comic figure before the power of the resurrected Christ.

The fear of death is at the root of so many fears that sap the vitality of our lives. In these next few weeks we will face those fears once again as we go with Jesus on the road to the cross. But, even as we make our way to the cross, the story of Lazarus reminds us with a wink and a nod of the rest of the story.

God in Christ has the last laugh.

So wake up my sleepy friends. We are about to hear a shout that will wake the dead.

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)