

**April 2, 2017 at Advent Lutheran Church in Cedarburg, Wisconsin. Fifth Sunday in Lent. John 11:1-45. The Raising of Lazarus. What kind of death?**

There is a theme concerning **death** that runs throughout the teachings of **Jesus** that is easy to **overlook** if we read the accounts as mere **miracle stories only**, instead of trying to figure out the **lesson** that is always being presented to us.

**I believe the raising of Lazarus is just such a story.**

I personally believe that the least important question is the one we usually ask first. Or at least I did, and many other people tell me they did too, mainly;

**"Did this really happen?" "Did a man dead for four days actually come back to life?"**

This is a long story with many twists and turns along the way. I will once again lift out what I believe are the **salient points** and what I have learned along the way on my own faith journey. I cannot tell you what **you must believe** about this or any other lesson, but I will tell you what it means to me. As always, the setting, the context is all important.

**Mary, Martha** and their brother **Lazarus** are some of Jesus' closest friends.

Tradition teaches that bringing **Lazarus** back to life shows that **Jesus was the Son of God** and as such had the power over life and death. That may be, but I believe there is so much more to this story. Because **Mary, Martha** and **Lazarus** were such close friends they already know who Jesus is and have no need for proof of anything.

We even hear it in **Mary's** words;

**"If you had been here my brother would still be alive!"**

Also, we are told that Jesus **knew** that his friend **Lazarus** was very ill, but said that the illness he was suffering does not lead to **death, that he is merely sleeping.**

Another clue that this is no mere recording of an event but **so much more**, is the rather **graphic** emphasis on the fact **Lazarus'** body had already started to **decompose**. Returning that **rotting body** to health puts this story in the context of **magic or fantasy, not faith.**

*The origin of the word miracle is Middle English. It originates from Old French, from the Latin word miraculum 'object of wonder,' from mirari 'to wonder,' from mirus 'wonderful.'*

In the scriptures all miracles are “signs” that point to something else.

As with all the **miracle stories** we might ask;

**"Which is the greater miracle here, that Jesus magically somehow brings a dead man to life, who by the way will die eventually anyway, or that through the power of our faith in God and life, and the miracle of modern medicine potentially dead people are brought back to life every single day."**

But this lesson is about **another kind of death**, a **death** that Jesus talks about repeatedly. The **death** that he says is the most important one. **Norman Cousins** speaks to this in his quote on life and death;

**"Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live."**

And **Jesus** says the same thing this way in Matthew 10:28;

**"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."**

We have already heard references to this **life of the spirit** into which we must be born. Jesus tells the **Canaanite** woman at the well that he is not interested in her **five marriages**, nor her current **living arrangements**, nor does he care that she is a **foreigner**. **Instead**, he tells her that the time has come for all human beings to worship God not in accordance with **religious tradition** and **ideology**, but in **spirit** and **truth**.

He tells **Nicodemus** that unless he is **born of the spirit**, or **born from above**, meaning in the spirit, **or spiritually**, he will never be part of the **kingdom of God**. And what is that? The kingdom of God is not a place, it is living according to what Jesus teaches about our behavior and how we live our lives.

**We**, in our **literalistic** and **materialistic** way of thinking want to understand and describe what this ultimately means and Jesus tells us as he told **Nicodemus**, that's not possible, because;

**"Those who are born of the spirit are like the wind. You don't know where it comes from or where it is going, but you can see the effects of it."**

I remember the first time I saw him. He is a big man, broad shoulders and huge hands and reminds me of someone who could crush whatever happened to be in his way. His hair is on the wild side and his clothing has seen better days. His skin is black as coal and when he talks his voice is barely a **whisper**.

I don't remember his name so for this story, I will call him **Lazarus**, which is not his name, although both **he** and the **story** are **true**. I met **Lazarus** some 30 years ago, as I moved from an **all-white suburban congregation** to **Sherman Park** in Milwaukee. **Lazarus** was a member of **Reformation Lutheran Church** in the **inner-core** of the city and a regular at the evening meals that I and others were served on Friday evenings.

There are bars over the doors and windows, doors are always locked, and dozens of homeless, often with **drug or desperation induced vacant eyes** line up and wait their turn to come inside for their weekly hot meal. It was **there** that I first met **Lazarus** because my responsibility that evening was to stand by the locked door and when told, open it to let in the next group of people waiting for their turn to enter.

Because there was certain **anxiety** if not outright **danger** at these gatherings, and because **Lazarus**, though of gentle spirit had such an **imposing** presence, the pastor of **Reformation** asked him to stand guard at the door with me or whoever else was volunteering. **Lazarus** did not say much. In fact, he said **nothing at all** unless you asked him a question.

So, it was not until several years later that I learned who he is and why he is there. It was the beginning of the **Martin Luther King Jr. All-A-Thon** to raise money for scholarships for inner city youth to go to college. I happened to be walking by myself and came upon **Lazarus** whom I greeted with the question;

**"You are participating in the walk too?"** To which he answered;

**"I walk every year because I owe them my life and more. My son received a Scholarship and is at University because of it. He is in pre-med. and doing really well."**

That was more than he had ever shared with me so astonished I asked;

**"And how about you? What is your story?"**

He said;

**"I am a street minister for the church because they saved my life. For years, I used Heroin, my wife left me, my life was hopeless and I was as good as dead. Pastor said I should be a minister because I had stared death in the face and was all but dead myself. He said I could help others wake up and live! "That was 23 years ago,"**

said Lazarus.

Whenever anyone wakes up to the **miracle of life**, whenever we realize that life itself is a **precious unrepeatable** gift from **God**, whenever we help someone else on that journey that we all share, indeed knowing that we are here to help each other go home, whenever these things happen **Lazarus** once again emerges from the tomb to begin to live again!

There is an ancient **Latvian wisdom** saying that translates into English this way:

***"There is you and there is me, but if we want, there can be we!"***

**On this 5<sup>th</sup>. Sunday in Lent we drive the nail that crucifies Christ whenever we separate ourselves into "Them," and "Us," for with God there is only "We."**