

# “Lazarus and the Gift of Life.”

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If you stop to think about it, life itself seems to be a battle between life and death. But the last thing we want to do is to stop and think about it. In his book, *The Denial of Death*, philosopher Ernest Beck says that we human beings spend our lives terrified of death at an unconscious level. Even when I was a young college student I look back and realize that I seemed to be driven by something in me that kept me running from one activity or one thing to another—fraternity life, student government, business manager of the college newspaper, in the college band, driving a bakery truck at 5:00 in the morning—driven for some reason to be a local prototype for the best-seller book of that time, *What Makes Sammy Run?* The philosopher's book would say that all that was an effort to prove that my life was worthwhile, because nagging in the back of my mind was an uncertainty about the value of my life.

We can all look in ourselves or around us for such examples. Every news program and newspaper gives you advertisements and daily doses of health news, because of course we want to push back death: we want to avoid talking about death; we want a life with a 100,000 mile warranty.

But with all that, we still have mixed feelings about death. There's an old story about Pat falling from a scaffold on a construction job and knocked unconscious. His friend Mike ran for the doctor. The doctor came and took one look at Pat and said, “Well, he's dead.” Just then Pat came to and heard what the doctor was saying and yelled, “Hey, I ain't dead!” To which Mike responded, “Ah, lay down, Pat. The doctor knows best.”

Don't you agree that there's something about us that wants to avoid surprises, there's something about us that responds to the comfort of an old familiar liturgy in a Book of Common Prayer that hopefully doesn't have to change even every 50 years? We're like Hazel Mote in Flannery O' Connor's *Wise Blood* who prefers her “Church Without a Cross” where the “lame don't walk, the blind don't see, the deaf don't hear, and the dead stay dead.”

But that isn't the way things really are. Life itself seems to be a battle between life and death, if you consider that all of our lives are a series of small deaths and failures, and at the same time opportunities for new starts, new discoveries, awakened hopes new energy and resources for renewal.

Let's think of the Gospel accounts from St. John that we've been hearing during these Sundays of Lent. They have all been telling the story of Jesus' confronting death in many forms. A substantial citizen Nicodemus came to Jesus in the night searching for a deeper, more authentic life. A woman living in the death of being a rejected outsider in her culture meets Jesus at the village town well and finds the acceptance she has long been searching for. And a blind man after a lifetime of social and religious ostracism reaches out to Jesus for healing.

All were coming to Jesus because they were living lives that were not really living lives. Which reminds me again of the poster on the store front mortuary in San Francisco back in the 60's that read "why go around half-dead when we can bury you for \$98?!" Jesus offered more than that; taking, in Ezekiel's words this morning, the dry bones of half-wasted lives and breathing new spirit in them.

And now in today's Gospel Jesus' faces death head-on when he learns that his beloved friend Lazarus has died. In a long and complicated story comes the tender yet powerful note, "Jesus began to weep." There are plenty of sentences in this long Gospel that are confusing, but this sentence is packed with an emotion of empathy, caring, and understanding that gives human substance to Jesus' grand declaration that "**I AM** the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and will never die."

These are not just comforting words from a funeral liturgy. Do you understand what Jesus is saying here? "Eternal life"—John's special way of describing a quality of life that is worth eternalizing—begins not at the end of time, or just at the time of death, but right now, in this moment; that life is available to you, right now, if you know your need and are willing to turn around make a new start, seeing all that happens now as your personal journey in faith. Everyone dies finally, but not everyone really lives. That's what my friend William Sloan Coffin meant when he wrote "The art of life is to die young as late as you can."

It's good that we're reading this Gospel on the last Sunday of Lent because the story of the raising of Lazarus is intentionally placed by John in his Gospel so that we might anticipate what lies in front of us in Holy Week and Easter. That's where the full struggle of the forces of life and death. are fully engaged. But John is saying that God's answer to death—resurrection and eternal life—isn't just an Easter thing. Look around you! It's happening every day. New life, resurrection life, eternal life, is something we can receive right now.

That message resonates through all four Gospels—which are literally the "good news" of Jesus Christ-- but that message comes to us in John's Gospel in a special way. However much scholars will keep debating as long as books are written about this historic accuracy of the Raising of Lazarus, one thing almost all scholars agree on: that the miracle stories in John's Gospel are "sign" stories—signs that point beyond the recorded miracle to the ways that Jesus is continually breaking open the tombs of our lives, until in this last story it is death itself that he defeats.

Whether or not you can accept or even understand the raising of Lazarus as actual fact is in the end, not the real point. What John is saying to us, as he expressed in story form then, is that no death is the final end for God.

Because God, the Source- with a capital S- of everything that has been and will be, is at work. Those who trust him, who take his life into their lives to fill the God-blank that all of us have, can experience wholeness and healing and eternal life, here and now.

That was as hard for Martha to understand firsthand from Jesus then as it may be for us now. But think back to times when things seem so dark you'd never see light again. Think back to times when relationships seem to have dried up, when an adolescent child seemed to be losing her way, and a job looked as if it would defeat you.

But somehow, through nothing you could do on your own, your life kaleidoscope turned toward hope, and a new light began to re-shape your situation. It was as if Someone was reaching out to you. You found a new strength, a new way to face things, and you began to take steps, perhaps even small steps, forward. That's resurrection now, a quality of life worth eternalizing, sometimes coming in surprising and unanticipated ways.

The Church's calendar can schedule this Lazarus reading on the Sunday before Palm Sunday and Holy Week, but Jesus' appearing on the scene cannot be scheduled—either then or now. Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha learned that. They also discovered Jesus' promise is that he will never fail us.

So now we claim from this story the power of Jesus to call us out from where we are buried, buried in our fears, our pain, our grief, our worries, life's pressures. For listen again to the words of the Psalmist this morning "I wait for the Lord...for with the Lord there is steadfast love and with him there is great power to redeem."

Next week, on Palm Sunday, it will be Jesus himself making his own way to the tomb of death. As his own prayer at Gethsemane shows, it's the last thing he wants. But watch next week how Jesus does it. He walks serenely, with confidence in a power not his own.

And we remember his words, "I am resurrection and I am life," he says. "Those who believe in me, though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and trusts in me will never die." With that we know that Eternal life, resurrection, is here for you and me, now. AMEN