

Lent 5A 2020 SSP

Text: St. John 11:1-45

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Saint John says that Jesus knew what he was doing when he raised Lazarus from the dead after four days. When the messengers from Lazarus's sisters told Jesus that his friend was very sick, Jesus knew by the time they arrived that Lazarus had died. Then Jesus waited two days before going to Lazarus's sisters Mary and Martha in Bethany near Jerusalem. When Jesus and his disciples got there, Lazarus had been dead four days. Many Jews believed that the soul remained near the body after death in the hope of returning to it.¹ If this idea was in the minds of the people around Lazarus, by the time Jesus arrived all hope of it was gone – Lazarus was irrevocably dead: "Lord by this time he stinketh," said Martha when Jesus ordered the stone rolled away from the cave where Lazarus was buried.

Jesus knew what he was doing. He was calling a dead man back into life. He also knew that this miracle would seal his fate with the Jewish religious authorities who were already making plans against him. Jesus's emotions, once he arrived at the scene of Lazarus's death, indicate his awareness that he has entered "enemy country" to win a great victory. Not only does Jesus weep, he is deeply troubled and moved. By what? – by death and its ugliness, and by the sorrow which it causes. This is what Jesus came into this world to fight and overcome; and here it was, right in his face.

At the beginning of his Gospel, Saint John declares that Jesus is the Word who was with God from eternity, the Word who is himself God, the Word by whom all things were made, the

¹ The NIV Study Bible (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1995), p.1615.

Word who was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Nowhere in the Gospel does this become more evident as Jesus astonishes all the witnesses at Bethany: The tomb is opened, and Jesus cries, “Lazarus, come forth!” And the dead man came out, still in his grave cloths. “Unbind him and let him go,” said Jesus. The Word by whom all things were made called his own creature back to life.

The news of the raising of Lazarus drew large crowds to Jerusalem to see Jesus as he entered the holy city. They also came to see Lazarus, with whom Jesus had dined sometime after this miracle.² Jesus’ miracle was a sign of still more fearful and wonderful things to come. It created an alliance against Jesus between the Temple authorities on the one hand and the Pharisees on the other, for fear the Romans would clamp down and even destroy the temple. The high priest Caiaphas without realizing it prophesied: “It is better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.”³

The Evangelist comments: “He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. So from that day on they plotted to take his life.”⁴ So the raising of Lazarus led directly to the death of Jesus and his Resurrection. But Christ’s Resurrection on Easter is of an entirely different order from the raising of Lazarus. Jesus’s grave was empty. His appearances revealed a reality on the other side of death. Jesus lives and will never die again; death has no dominion over him.

I leave us with two thoughts. First – earlier in John’s Gospel, Jesus said, “Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He has crossed over from death to life.”

² John 12:1ff

³ John 11:47ff

⁴ John 11:51-53

The Word who became flesh, Jesus, says we can take hold of eternal life here and now. This temporal world is not all there is. The one who believes in Jesus, even though he dies physically, does not die eternally. And Jesus will raise him up at the last day.

This brings us to the second thought. At the end of time, on the last day, Jesus's voice, that same Word which was made flesh and which cried, "Lazarus, come forth," will sound through the whole valley of the shadow of death. It will ring through the dust and the tombs to raise the dead who will be judged truly as they have lived. And those who love the appearing of the Lord will have his mercy and live with him forever.

So we have two anchors of hope for the soul, confirmed in the story of Lazarus and his two sisters. We can hold fast to Jesus for dear life in the here and now. And we can rest in hope, even in the grave, for life everlasting.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.