

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Lent, 2014
St. James' Church. Mt. Airy
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The raising of Lazarus from the dead in John's gospel is not the only story we have of Jesus raising someone from the dead. But it is the one richest in detail and in symbolism. There are, as you probably noticed when you heard it, many things about the story that are confusing, and a few things that are troubling.

Just like in last week's story of the healing of the man born blind, Jesus tells his disciples that Lazarus' misfortune happened in order to glorify God. This is a hard-to-accept idea about illness and death, not to mention a difficult idea about God's purpose.

Even harder to accept may be Jesus' delay in coming to Lazarus, Mary and Martha. There was a tradition among some of the Jewish people of Jesus' day that the soul lingered near the body for three days, and only on the fourth day was someone unwakeably dead, so it makes sense from a narrative standpoint that John would want to highlight the truly miraculous nature of Lazarus' rising, but from a human standpoint, to see Jesus sacrificing the feelings of his friends in order to make a point seems uncommonly cruel.

On the other hand, death, which will come to all of us, and the grief of survivors, are often as harsh and arbitrary as the events of this story. If our deaths and our grieving happen according to God's plan, that plan and its calendar are completely

hidden from us, and it might be that a kinder, less messy version of this story would be difficult to connect to our own experience – it would still be a story about Jesus but not necessarily a story about us.

So just how is this story of the miraculous raising of a dead man a story about us? No doubt many of us, in grieving for the loss of a loved one, have prayed with all our hearts for just such a miracle, but I bet that if the answer to any of those prayers had been anything other than a kindly “no,” we all would have heard about it. Raising the four-day dead was unusual in Jesus’ day, but it is unheard of in ours, despite the best efforts of medical science.

But this most extraordinary of miracle stories is, in the end, a story for us.

In C. S. Lewis’ book, *Miracles*, which offers a rationale for faith in the supernatural events of scripture to a scientific age, Lewis divides Jesus’ miracles into two categories. There are what Lewis calls miracles of the old creation, like the feeding of the five thousand, and the changing of water into wine, and the healing of various infirmities, and there are miracles of the new creation, of which the raising of Lazarus is an important example.

The miracles of the old creation, Lewis argues, involve God doing quite ordinary things in rather extraordinary ways. Changing water into wine is what vines and yeast do all the time. The process is no less miraculous when it happens over the course of months than when Jesus accomplishes it in a moment, but we are used to

the natural processes of growth, harvest and fermentation, so they don't catch us by surprise and we don't always notice the miracle in it.

Similarly, taking a small amount of grain and turning it into enough food for a multitude is the everyday business of farmers. The multiplication of loaves (and of fishes, for that matter) is only extraordinary because Jesus does it so quickly.

What Lewis calls miracles of the new creation, though, are another matter altogether. Resurrection; bringing life to the dead, is not a part of the rhythm of creation. It is God doing a new thing.

And, Lewis argues further, the main miracle of the new creation, the resurrection of Jesus, changes everything. When God interjects resurrection into the rhythm of creation, it changes all of creation. It is no wonder, he argues, that we have accounts of resurrection from before Jesus' own rising. The resurrection of Jesus is like a stone thrown into the pool of history – it causes ripples in every direction.

Resurrection changes the past as well as the future. Not only is nothing after Jesus the same, but, because of the resurrection, nothing before Jesus is the same either.

As weird as that idea seems, I've said to you before that the present really does have the power to change the past – it is the choices we make today that make the things that have happened to us meaningful or life-changing, not the events themselves.

And the new life that God promises in Jesus – eternity, living water, light coming into the world – has the power to change history – to change your history. Every time you choose life over death; kindness over cruelty; love over indifference; your story, your whole history, becomes the story of a person who chooses life.

Your past is constantly remade by the choices you make today. And your present will be reshaped by the choices you make tomorrow. Resurrection; new life; eternity – becomes part of the fabric of your history as well as your future when you choose life now.

And so the question before us is how are we going to choose life? And it's always a present question. There is no need to lament over poor choices and missed opportunities in the past, not because we can't do anything about them, but because we can. In choosing life today; in working to heal a broken world, to mend a broken relationship, to feed the hungry, to raise up the downtrodden, or to right a wrong or stand against an injustice you not only transform the world, you rewrite your own story. Whatever may have been broken in your past, in choosing life, in living the resurrected life into which God calls you in Jesus, your own story becomes a tale of resurrection, and the reign of God comes that much nearer to all of us.

The story of Jesus' raising of Lazarus might be a lens through which to see the story of this community. In a way, and I hope I don't offend anyone by saying this,

the old church building was like the tomb in which Lazarus was buried. The church community wasn't dead, but it was clear to many in the congregation that staying in that building meant a kind of death – no room to grow, or to be the kind of community the people of St. James' felt called to be. And when you heard the call to come out of that old building and become something new, you listened.

I know the decision was difficult, and not unanimous, but I suppose that Lazarus returned to life with some reluctance too. Imagine being resurrected and then having to die all over again. One of the legends about Lazarus is that after Jesus' resurrection and the subsequent persecution of Jesus' followers, Lazarus fled to Cyprus, where he lived for another thirty years, and went on to become the first bishop of Kition on that island. But it is also said that Lazarus was so troubled by the sight of unredeemed sinners in his four days spent in Hades that he never smiled again for that entire thirty years.

The story of St. James' resuscitation is a little more cheerful than that. We are a community who has chosen life over death, growth over stagnation, and we are still smiling. We have our own resurrection story to tell, and all of you; and this beautiful new building; and the beautiful old building you walked out of in order to be here are all part of that story.

And we have a lot more resurrection stories to tell, of a future that will again transform this present day – stories of the ways that we will continue to be called

out of places without enough life into places where the abundant life which God intends for us can flourish.

We are our stories. They transform and redeem us. As we come to Holy Week and retell the story of how God's love transformed and redeemed the world, think about how we would like our story to be told by our future selves and by future generations. Think about what tombs we still need to walk out of, and choose life.

Amen.