

WGUMC April 6, 2014 John 11:17-44
"Dead Man Rising"

The Gospel of John is full of signs and wonders. It's a major theme of the book. Each sign or miracle that Jesus performs is more impressive than the last. He starts off just by turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana. [John 2] Then he feeds the 5,000 with a few loaves of bread. [John 6] Last week, we had the story of how he healed a man who had been born blind. And the man tells us, "Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind." [John 9:32] And today we have the story of Jesus setting a new personal record.

But the raising of Lazarus raises a question for us. This story is only found in the Gospel of John. So, why did the author include it then and what does it mean for us now? The Gospel of John was the last of the four gospels to be written. It's generally dated around the year 100. That's thirty years after the rebellion against Rome, when tens of thousands of

Jews were killed and the temple was completely destroyed. The nation of Israel ceased to exist, and its population was scattered around the Mediterranean. The destruction of the temple was like a sudden cardiac arrest for the Jewish people. So into this dire situation comes a story about life after death and hope after defeat.

It's a story we need to hear today. Not because we need to believe that Jesus did miracles back then so much as we need to believe that he can still work miracles in us now. After all, who really cares if Lazarus came out of the grave, if we are still stuck in there?

We want to believe in the possibility of new life right now. But are we ready for the lesson that Lazarus wants to teach us? To put it bluntly, are we willing to spend time in the tomb in order to be raised from the dead?

Four days in a tomb has been sounding pretty attractive to me lately. I ran into Leslie Chamberlain preparing for the big

JYM fundraiser. She looked tired. I was tired. I told her that we needed to go on retreat but what I wanted was a sleep retreat! So I think a tomb would be great: dark, quiet, no interruptions, no cell phone reception. I could sleep for four days.

There's only one problem with this scenario. If I woke up and then went back to that same old live-too-fast, work-too-hard, sleep-too-little routine, I'd be more like "dead man walking" than "dead man rising."

If you remember that movie, you may remember where it got its name. Prison guards used to yell out, "Dead man walking," whenever they were moving a condemned criminal. And Sister Helen Prejean used that phrase for her book about her relationship with a death row inmate.

The book and movie were such a success that Sister Helen now goes around the country speaking out for an end to the death penalty. I applaud her efforts. But while she works to

stop the state from killing people, we need someone to work to stop us from killing ourselves.

We have someone. His name is Jesus. And yet every time we make a commitment to him to change, every time we try to get ourselves into life recovery, we're always coming up with conditions, aren't we?

Here's my favorite: can't we get to new life without having to die first? Mary and Martha were wondering that, too. The part of the story that we didn't read this morning tells us that when Jesus first heard that Lazarus was seriously ill, he hung around for two whole days before going to visit him. By the time he got there, Lazarus had been dead four days. Both Mary and Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

How many times have we expressed that very same frustration! God, if you had shown up sooner, I wouldn't have had to suffer. If you had stopped me on my first drink, if you

had intervened earlier in my marriage, if you had just gotten me to the doctor's office at the first sign of trouble, this all would have turned out better. Whatever disaster befalls us, we are always asking the equivalent of, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Jesus, where were you when we needed you!

When it comes to new life, we always have a problem with the timing: we want ours, not God's. But then there's also the problem of the smell. Mary and Martha knew this one, too. New life is pretty enticing, until we get a good whiff of it. Maybe that's why we always put flowers on graves and decorate our sanctuary with lilies on Easter: to cover up the fact that any big life change really stinks. Keep that stone in place!

When we are going through a life crisis, the dirty laundry piles up, the leftovers from last week go bad. We can tell that someone needs changing and then we realize that we don't

have a kid in diapers anymore. As many of you know, the road to new life is not a stroll through the rose garden.

So, can we skip the death part on the way to new life? Jesus says, "nope." If we want the new person to live, we have to let the old one die. That means we're going to have to step out of the world as we know it and life as we live it and go into the tomb and stay there long enough so that whatever is dead in us will rot away. It's not going to be easy and it won't be pretty. Like dead tissue in a deep wound, it's going to be stinky. But if you want that wound to heal, you have to let the diseased flesh die and then cut it away.

If that's making you a little too queasy, let's change images for a minute. I was interested in the article in the newspaper about the minimalists from Montana who are making the rounds in the Bay Area [Patrick May, *Mercury News*, March 31, 2014]. Josh Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus (no kidding, that's his real name) are two friends who started out their

working lives in Ohio. Like most young, single guys, they were focused on making money so they could buy more cool stuff.

They were doing quite well for themselves, having achieved the status of "wasteful twentysomethings." Then, as the paper put it, they each "decided to downsize the hell out of their unhappy and spiritually bankrupt lives." They quit their 80-hour-a-week jobs, sold their houses, got rid of most of their stuff and embraced a life of less money and more meaning.

They now live in a rental in Missoula and write blogs and books.

If you've ever fantasized about doing this, Nicodemus has a method that just might work for you. He started out his new life by packing up everything he owned as if he were moving, put all the boxes in one room of his condo, and then unpacked items only as needed: his toothbrush, his bed and some sheets, some work clothes. In the end, he got rid of 80% of what he owned.

I admit that this is easier when you have no spouse and no kids. But even if we can't do this right now with our physical belongings, we can still do it with our emotional and psychological baggage. Think of Lazarus' tomb as a room where you pack up every feeling you own, every memory you have (good and bad), every relationship and every regret, every bit of grace, every ounce of guilt, every pleasure and every pain you have ever known. Pack it all up and put it in the tomb. Take out only those feelings and experiences that give you life and enhance your ability to love. Then prepare to give the rest away, because it has started to smell anyway.

We could choose to do this, but most of us won't until we're forced to. Yes, there are times in our lives when, like it or not, we find ourselves living in a tomb: when the pace is too fast for us, when the situation is too dire, when the marriage is too hard, when the parenting is too much, when the pain is too

intense, when the diagnosis is too grim, and when our faith is all too dead.

When that happens, sit tight. The story of Lazarus tells us that Jesus won't rush right in to save us. Instead, he'll leave us there for long enough so that all that dead stuff in us begins to stink. And when we can't stand the stench of our situation any longer, when we are willing to give up the death that clings so closely to us and embrace the life that Jesus so wants for us, when we are ready—and not a moment sooner—then we will hear him say to us, "Brother/Sister, Come out." And then he'll call someone to come unbind us and let us go.

Yea, but then what? Lucky Lazarus lived, but he was going to have to die again. And so will we. In that case, we can think of every day as a near-death experience, but we can also think of every day as a chance for a "new life" experience. I look forward to going on retreat soon, because you don't need a dead woman walking for a pastor. I hope you are scheduling

some retreat time, too. Lazarus and I will meet you at the tomb on Easter.