



## DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?

November 3, 2019, All Saints Sunday (Observed)

John 11:17-44

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“God doesn’t like miracles. Never has. I’m surprised Jesus doesn’t know that. Miracles are disruptive. When the dust settles, there is always damage done—not all the hungry are fed, and not all the sick are healed. Not all the dead can rise. But Jesus does not learn.”<sup>1</sup> These are the words of one of the temple priests in a novelization by Richard Beard of the story of the raising of Lazarus. And I cannot say I disagree with this character.

Mary and Martha are given this gift of the return of their beloved brother, but each of us and all of us throughout this sanctuary and throughout history know how often such similar fervent prayers go unanswered. Yesterday at Brick Church we had memorials for a 26-year-old and a three-year-old. Why raise this single man and only this man in this moment?

I suppose the world’s response to Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead should not be that surprising. The council of chief priests and Pharisees immediately began planning for Jesus’ own death. This level of disruption to the natural order puts the order of all things at risk.

So why does Jesus do this? Why does he raise Lazarus from the dead? The NRSV translation does not quite do the original Greek justice when it says that at the sight of Mary weeping and then again at the tomb Jesus is “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” In the Greek he is angry, furious. The literal translation is that he snorted with anger. Nikos Kazantzakis, in his novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*, describes it like this, “All the blood went to his head, his eyes rolled and disappeared, only the whites remained. He brought forth a bellow you’d have thought there was a bull inside of him, and we all got scared. Then suddenly while



he stood there, trembling all over, he uttered a wild cry, a strange cry, something from another world. The archangels must shout in the same way when they're angry... 'Lazarus!' he cried. 'Come out!'"<sup>2</sup>

In the Gospel of John we are told that the miracles Jesus performs are to function as signs pointing to the kingdom, which I do not doubt. But they are as well, Jesus' forceful protest against all that is broken in the world. When He feeds the five thousand, He is pushing back hard against the stark reality of deprivation. When He heals the sick, he just cannot see yet another person suffering. And when He raises the dead, He is potently challenging our mortal predicament, our losing battle with death. Just as He demands "Unbind him, and let him go" as Lazarus exits the tomb, each and every time He intercedes in the ways of the world the same cry is in His heart. Unbind them. Unbind them from hunger. Unbind them from pain. Unbind them from death. Unbind them.

But for all of the pyrotechnics of Lazarus alive again, the real action for me, the critical turning point, the place where our eyes most need to be focused, comes nearly 20 verses prior. Well before Jesus gets to the tomb, He is met by Martha. She laments the death of her brother and that Jesus did not arrive sooner. He announces to her "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Then Jesus asks her a question, "Do you believe this?" Mired in mourning, in the midst of her beloved brother's death, she is called to answer whether the man standing before her, the one who was too late to save her brother, is the resurrection and the life. Is he the one who can conquer death for us all? Through her grief and disappointment, whether she comprehends all of the vast consequences or not, her answer is clear. "Yes, Lord, I believe you are the messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

On this All Saints Sunday this is the question we are called to answer. "Do you believe this? This is the question we are called to answer every time we walk into this building. We are called to answer it every Sunday as we gather for worship; as we show up for every committee meeting; every time we serve in East Harlem. This is the question we are called to answer every day of our lives; as we get up



and head to work in the morning; as we celebrate our victories and recover from our defeats; as we love our families and our friends; and most importantly as we mourn those who die. “Do you believe this?” Do you believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life?”

Can you believe this? How do we believe this together? Is it possible that Jesus is the resurrection and the life?

Now, if it is not possible we just might have to think about closing up shop. If Jesus Christ is not the resurrection and the life what exactly is our niche? After all, the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y can offer Adult Education and interesting lectures. Plenty of good therapists to provide comfort, care, and counseling. Our schools provide amazing programming for our kids. And lots of agencies are being helpful to those in need. If Jesus is not the resurrection and the life, why exactly do we, the church, exist?

Now, to be fair, I will say that anyone who can answer a resounding yes to this question every day, in every circumstance without doubt or wonder makes me a little nervous. I am not sure they have necessarily plumbed the depths of the question before them. It is an audacious claim. It is a statement beyond all rational deduction. We are entitled to moments of doubt and disbelief. After all, we do know for certain the power of death. And the raising of Lazarus does nothing to remove the grief we feel when those we love die and they are not raised before us. But even when doubt and disbelief color what we can see, this is still the vision to which we must strive and hold on to for dear life.

Or else, we could just sell the property and they could put up another CVS pharmacy. Now I turn to our student ministers Margaret, Anthony and Jacob. I know you are all pouring your heart into pursuing this ministry thing, but, if Jesus Christ is not the resurrection and the life maybe it is not too late to think about another career. You are all bright, certainly it is not too late for you to go to law school and put your powers of persuasion to work in a more lucrative field. And if you decided to work your way up to judge, you would still get to wear a nice black robe!



But, if Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life; if those who believe in him, even though they die shall live; if you believe this; if we believe this together; if you do and we do, forget about the LSATs. Forget about doing anything else. This is where you are supposed to be. This is the only place for you to be, the only place for all of us to be.

This is not to say that life in the church will ever be perfect. The world is broken in countless ways. Each and every church has its own particular set of imperfections. Every clergyperson has his or her own collection of limitations. And while every parishioner has his or her own set of idiosyncrasies, some of you more than others carry your own personal set of bumps and bruises. But when we believe that Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life, we become resurrection people. And that makes all the difference.

In the Russian Tradition, Lazarus is the patron saint of second chances. And how much do we all need that? How many time do we stumble into doing the wrong thing, forget to do something important, or hurt those around us? Some days we do all three. And we certainly have days like that in the church as well.

And when these moments occur it is helpful to remember Lazarus, freed from the tomb and given a second chance. Snatched from death to reveal God's glory and it enraged Jesus that his friend should be denied life. Lazarus does not do a single thing to earn this reprieve but he receives it nonetheless. This is a small foretaste of the entire world being offered freedom through grace, being unbound, from all of our human frailties, even death itself.

As resurrection people we are called to practice our own visits to Bethany. We certainly do not raise the dead. But we resolutely push back against the suffering that the limitations of mortality place upon us all. And we offer second chances. When we bump up against each other and bruise each other we are called to forgive others and ourselves, over and over again. Because each and every second chance, each and every protest against suffering is a small symbol pointing toward the resurrection we have been promised.



In the Eastern Orthodox Church, the day before Palm Sunday is known as Lazarus Saturday. I think we should add it to our liturgical calendar. If we can envision Jesus raising the dead; if we can live as if there is indeed a place and a time beyond our every limitation; if we can be reminded of Jesus' brash and bold claim that he is the resurrection and the life; and when asked the question, "Do you believe this?", we can respond, "Yes, Lord, I believe."

Well then, just imagine what we all can do together in this place. Imagine the comfort and care that can be provided; the praise and worship that can be offered up; the compassion that can be sent out into the wider world. Imagine if we were unbound and free. Imagine if we were resurrection people.

Staring in the face of death, as we do all too often, do we believe Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life? Do you believe this? What about you? And you? And you? What about the rest of us? This is no rhetorical question. Do you believe this? If we do, just imagine how unbound and free we will be.

*Thanks be to God. Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> Beard, Richard, *Lazarus is Dead*, Europa Editions, New York, 2012, p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> Kazantzakis, Nikos, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1968, p. 427.