

**Seekers, Sinners, Saints: Profiles in Faith  
(V) They Asked for a Miracle**

**A Sermon by Louise Westfall** [Sermon Germination Group: Ian Hoffman,  
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**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**

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**Text: John 11:1-45**

*The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker's Pulitzer Prize-winning book from the early 1970s, claims that fear of dying fuels the drive behind all human civilization. Everything—from the way we organize society to the arts and finance and even religion---Becker attributes to a fundamental quest to transcend our mortality. It's fairly dense, and I confess I read only enough of it in graduate school to get the humor when Woody Allen's character in *Annie Hall* gives his girlfriend a copy of it for her birthday. But the terror of death—our loved one's and our own—lies very close to the surface of our lives, and we do all we can: from supporting cancer research to exercising and paying for long-term medical plans; to keep it buried. (I have an additional fear of totaling the cost of all the products I regularly buy with names such as "regenerist" "age-defying" and "revive.")

The sermon series during Lent has examined some biblical characters whose search for authentic faith led to an encounter with Jesus, and a significant shift in their understanding of the meaning and purpose of human life. We've spoken of the truth that emerges not from a position of certainty but of seeking; that Christian faith is a journey, a spiral of discovery and questioning and insight and struggle and lots of walking. The Fairmounters who participated in sermon germination with today's text found it an intriguing one that focuses the entire journey, as it counters the fear of death with a foretaste of death's destruction. The raising of Lazarus, they agreed, is not so much a miracle of resuscitation, but a promise that God can be trusted, come what may. Listen for God's Word in the reading from the gospel according to John in the eleventh chapter at the first verse. [READ JOHN 11:1-45]

The Renaissance artist Rembrandt's painting of this text depicts the moment just after Jesus has called Lazarus out of his tomb. Though portrayed in Rembrandt's typically somber hues, the figure of Jesus nonetheless dominates the canvas. His arm is stretched up, and he towers over the sisters and other mourners. The expression on his face is confident, yet with a note of surprise, as if Jesus too is awestruck at the power of God. Lazarus is just emerging from the shadowy grave, still wrapped in the stark white grave clothes. It's a pitch-perfect rendering of the biblical story. Can you believe it?

I came to the sermon germination discussion fully prepared with the best biblical and theological arguments for not taking this passage as literal historical narrative. For one thing, it's found only in John's gospel; Matthew, Mark, and Luke say nothing about it. We can't imagine the other gospel writers omitting this miracle in their accounts proclaiming Jesus, son of God, savior of the world. And why Lazarus? Other people around Jesus died, and they didn't get raised. Think John the Baptist, for example; his death seems to have affected Jesus' deeply, yet he remained headless in the grave. Even more important for interpreting this passage is to remember the gospel writer's particular use of miracles. He includes them: the hungry multitude gathered to hear Jesus on the hillside, fed from a few loaves, the blind receiving sight, the dead raised—but not so that we'll be wowed by this wonder worker. No, John consistently uses these stories as "signs" proving Jesus' identity: "I am the bread of life." "I am the light of the world." "I am the resurrection and the life." John is less concerned with a coherent, factual account of Jesus' life as he is with outlining the first-century church's reflection upon its meaning. For this gospel, Jesus' crucifixion is the crucial axis upon which the rest of the narrative turns; he refers to the cross as Jesus' "glorification." Notice how even this miracle is framed by threats to Jesus by the religious authorities; murderous intent that is only fueled by his power and authority. Only a few days after Jesus calls Lazarus out of his grave, he will be placed into his own. There's no attempt to soften the reality of death. And Martha was right: it stinks.

Most biblical scholarship makes these theological and literary points to help us understand the truth of this text as metaphorical, not literal. But frankly, the sermon germination group wasn't that interested in such explanations, because they weren't particularly bothered by the question of whether this incident "really happened." One gently suggested protean efforts to make the text rational was the theological version of "data torture." Another, a physician, pointed out that the definition of death has changed drastically in two thousand years. Conceivably, Lazarus was not "dead" in a 21<sup>st</sup> century way. And the adjective "miraculous" could be applied to the resuscitations regularly performed through modern medicine. So whether Jesus literally raised Lazarus from death was not the compelling question they wanted to ask.

Instead, you know what got them? The image of Jesus weeping. Here is the One we call Lord and Savior, powerful and majestic and ruler of the universe, with a human face, etched with tears. A man deeply moved by loss and grief. An example to all who have ever wondered what to say to comfort someone at the death of a loved one. The eloquence of presence. Mourning death, missing his friend, sharing the pain of loss.

Jesus' tears contradict conventional notions of God, powerful and impassive, involved in creation only "from a distance." The God whose will is unquestionable: "we can't understand it; we just have to accept it." No, the God Jesus revealed is one who stands with us in death; who suffers with us; whose unsearchable understanding includes the full range of human emotions: anger, rage, disappointment, despair. Whatever we feel in the face of death, be it the death of loved ones or the daily deaths we experience through change, erosion, aging, transition; whatever we fling with the handfuls of dirt, God receives and redeems.

For weeping is not all Jesus does as he stands with us in death. Jesus also acts....to bring life to lifeless situations. "Come out" he calls. And the life-giving breath of God goes forth and opens our graves, fills dead spirits and brings them out alive. Death is not denied; though life is not always restored to just what it was before.

Lazarus, after all, was “raised” this time, but you cannot really call it a resurrection; at some point, he died again. Yet his raising is a kind of living illustration that for people of faith, the journey does not conclude with the graveside service. Death is overcome; death is no longer “the end” of life, but is transformed into a gateway leading to the journey ahead and a brand new life. The metaphor holds, whether we’re talking about the cessation of physical life, or the hundred little ways we die every day: the losses and disappointments and dead-ends we experience in relationships, work, community. Even these too will be transformed through the One who is the resurrection and the life!

And perhaps, most amazingly of all, God not only brings life out of death, but invites us to share in that life-giving enterprise. Can you see the raised Lazarus stumbling out of the tomb, eyes blinking at the brightness of day, still tightly wrapped in the confining strips of cloth that bound his dead body? It took the others to *Unbind him, and let him go*. Fact is, this new life is one that cannot be lived alone. We will stumble on the habits, categories, practiced behaviors of our old, fearful lives. But thankfully, we are welcomed into a community where with acceptance and patience, forgiveness and love, the remnants of death are stripped away, and we can walk without fear, freely and fully into the day.

Just recently I learned that Vincent van Gogh also painted the raising of Lazarus, his only known one of a biblical scene. While he was hospitalized for depression, his brother Theo sent him a copy of the Rembrandt, and the two bear some similarity. The two sisters’ faces are wreathed in joy at the sight of their brother reanimated. Yet curiously, the figure of Jesus is not pictured in van Gogh’s; instead, there is a brilliant yellow sun at the top center of the canvas. To me it seems an affirmation of new life even when the Source of that life is beyond our sight, even beyond our understanding. *Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.*

Friends, believing is seeing. We can trust God’s faithful love to do for us we cannot do for ourselves: bring life out of death. We can entrust those who are dear to us, and our very selves to God, at all times

and in every circumstance. We will grieve the deaths that will come to us all; we will weep, for ourselves and for others. And then, by the grace of God, we will see ...the life that will never die. TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD'S ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH JESUS CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER. AMEN.

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SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

During Lent, some Fairmount members and friends have been exploring prayer at the Five Great Evenings of Sharing. Last week we learned about the practice of Ignatius of Loyola, a kind of prayer discipline through which to grow in relationship to God through Jesus Christ. Ignatius urged his students to enter into Scripture by actively imagining gospel scenes. This morning I invite us to experience a brief time of this contemplation this method.

First, relax into God's presence. Breathe deeply, inhaling and exhaling fully. Pray for the grace to grow in the knowledge of God's love for you.

Let your mind return to the gospel reading for today. Where are you in the scene? With the disciples, unsettled and anxious about the dangers ahead? With the mourners, resigned to the finality of death? Can you hear yourself in Martha's unspoken questions: Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him? Perhaps you see yourself as Lazarus, bound up in dead-end situations. Picture yourself there; interact with Jesus and the others. What do you want to ask of him? What resurrections do you need in your life? Be aware of your feelings; listen to your heart. Hear Jesus saying to you: 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.

Come back into this space, simply thanking God for being with you in prayer. Amen.

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