

Sermon 3-22-26
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Based on the Gospel Lesson for The Fifth Sunday in Lent, John 11:1-44.

Scream!

This morning we've got two of the best scripts a horror movie director could ever dream of — and from the Bible! In the first lesson, from chapter 37 of Ezekiel, we've got an ancient battlefield with hundreds and hundreds of unburied bodies. The flesh rotted away long ago. The animals have picked over and scattered the bones. And the skulls and bones have been exposed for years, dry and brittle.

A command is given and the bones move. SCREAM! They assemble into complete skeletons. But the skeletons don't rise up. (The script needs to be re-written here.) Anyway, something weirder happens. Reverse rot! Bits of muscle and guts begin to appear on the bones. SCREAM! And then whole, complete, but dead bodies are formed — hundreds of them laying on the field. Then a command is given and they all stand up alive. ZOMBIES! SCREAM! But this was only a supernatural vision and only one guy saw it.

On the other hand, in the gospel lesson from John chapter 11, we have a real tomb with the stone rolled away and a crowd in front of it; a guy really four days dead wrapped up like a mummy laying inside it, rotting away. Suddenly, there's a command for the dead guy to come out of the tomb. What more do we need in a horror script? The mummy, struggling in the wraps, comes out of the tomb entrance. SCREAM! SCREAM! SCREAM! Then comes a command to cut the wraps loose from a body that has been dead for four days. SCREAM! DISGUST! This took place in broad daylight. And that's the part that needs to be re-written. We need a dark stormy night — lightning, and wind moaning. SCREAM!

For our purposes today, we want to look at the dialogues in these lessons. However, even in one of the dialogues we have a good horror movie script. Ezekiel 37:12-13, "12. . . Thus says the Lord GOD: 'Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. 13 And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people.'" So there's going to come a day when, if you're standing in a cemetery on that day, you're going to see all the graves opening up and bodies climbing out. REALLY SCREAM!

But if you don't run away and stand there, it will become clear in a few minutes that everyone who just came out of a grave did so in an incredible, immortal human body that will never die again. And you'll suddenly realize that your own body has been transformed into one of those bodies. Now, whether you will rejoice or be horrified about this change depends on whether you're one of Yahweh's children who has been redeemed by the blood of Messiah, or not. If not, then the real screaming has only just begun.

Our main dialogues today come from the gospel of dialogues: John. And here's the setup. Jesus became good friends with a family that lived in Bethany, a town a few miles outside of Jerusalem. We know there were three apparently unmarried siblings: Lazarus, Martha and Mary. We know from the other gospels that at one point they hosted Jesus and his entourage for at least a day. That was the occasion when a most unusual thing happened. A

Jewish rabbi let a woman, Mary, sit at His feet listening to His teaching. Martha complained that she wasn't getting any help from her sister. But Jesus welcomed Mary and basically invited Martha to do the same. For that reason, we don't know how late dinner was that night.

Now, today's gospel lesson tells us that Lazarus became mortally ill. The ladies rushed a message to Jesus where He was on the other side of the Jordan. But Jesus purposely delayed and told the disciples that He was doing so. Last week, we encountered the man born blind who suffered for forty years with blindness so that God could eventually exhibit His power in Jesus. Today, we have the same thing. Jesus let Mary and Martha go through the terrible grief of death in order that the power of God might be displayed through Him. Now, we could accuse God of torturing people in order to show His power. However, no one ever does. For, the glorious result of the miracle is so much greater than the suffering that we forget about the suffering.

But there's something else behind the circumstances — fake miracles. When a well known forty year old man who everyone in his community knows has been blind since birth suddenly goes about seeing, it's very difficult to declare a fake miracle. In the same way, when a well known man has been dead for four days, but then walks out of a tomb alive in front of a crowd, it's almost impossible to declare it a fake miracle.

Jesus was only dead in the tomb from late Friday afternoon to very early Sunday morning. For this reason, so-called "Christian" scholars of the late 19th and early 20th centuries who had been infected by philosophical naturalism thought it reasonable to explain away the supernatural nature of Jesus' resurrection by hypothesizing that He had only fainted on the cross, then had revived in the cool darkness of the tomb. This is called the swoon theory. The reasoning of these scholars was pathetically faulty for a variety of reasons that we won't deal with here. Just note that when considering Lazarus, it's much harder to use a swoon theory for the resuscitation of someone who has been dead for four days. This was no fake miracle. And as we'll see, even Jesus' most devoted enemies didn't doubt the miracle. Jesus' most devoted enemies didn't doubt His resurrection either.

Before we go on. I make a big distinction between the raising of Lazarus and the raising of Jesus. To do so I use two different words: resuscitation and resurrection. Resuscitation happens when someone is brought back from the dead into this mortal life. With modern technology, resuscitation has become quite common. But everyone who is resuscitated into this mortal life has to die again. That was also true of Lazarus.

On the other hand, Jesus was resurrected. This means that His body not only was made alive again, but was supernaturally transformed into an immortal body — one that can never die again. And that supernatural transformation may have left evidence behind.

Indeed, it's being recognized that the Shroud of Turin is quite probably the burial cloth of Jesus Christ. One reason is that so far no credible explanation of the negative image of the man on the cloth can be put forward. It's not a forged medieval paint job or anything similar. Indeed, one possibility is that radiation of some type created it. However, it has been estimated that it would take the entire energy necessary to power a vast city like New York to create such an image. Therefore, if the shroud was Jesus' burial cloth, it's clear something quite powerful and supernatural happened to His body. That something must be immortality.

So, let's look into Jesus' dialogue with Martha. It begins with Martha hurtfully rebuking Jesus for not coming sooner. John 11:21 "Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'" This is the suffering I was talking about.

However, Martha quickly shifts gears by saying in John 11:22, "But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." That was a gigantic, wild statement of faith that with Jesus even the impossible is possible. It was obviously based on Martha's experience with Jesus that the Father always listened to Jesus' prayers. Always!

As in all the dialogues recorded in John, Jesus immediately took Martha's statement of faith and went off in a different direction with it. John 11:23, "Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.'" It's clear Martha didn't understand or couldn't quite believe what Jesus said for she responded in John 11:24, "... 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.'" In other words, Jesus, you must be talking about the resurrection on the last day. Right? And from her response, it's clear that Martha is a believer in the resurrection from the dead. I wonder where she got that from? Ezekiel 37, maybe?

In response to Martha Jesus proclaimed one of His great I AM statements. John 11:25, "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life.'" Remember, Yahweh's name in Exodus 3 is I AM WHO I AM and I AM for short. Therefore, anytime Jesus said I AM about Himself, He was declaring Himself to be Yahweh. And if Jesus is Yahweh, He very easily can be the resurrection and the life. We have life only because our Creator, Yahweh, exists. And if there is resurrection into immortal, eternal righteous life, it's going to come from Yahweh. Most important is *the* life. For it's clear that there are two possibilities for eternal life. One is eternal righteousness. The other is eternal rebellion and evil. Jesus unequivocally proclaimed Himself the only source of righteous eternal life.

Jesus then went on to expand His claim in John 25-26, "Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" Now, tell me, if someone came up to you on the street and introduced himself as "the resurrection and the life," and then claimed that if you believed in him, you would never die, what would you do? Yeah. Actually you would be faced with the three L choice. The person before you is either a lunatic or a liar or he is what he claims to be: Lord. If it was someone on the streets of New York, the first two choices would be the only possibilities.

But, when faced with the three L choice, Martha chose Lord. And not only did she choose Lord, she chose it the biggest way possible. John 11:27, "She [Martha] said to [Jesus], 'Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.'" Why? How? She knew that God always listened to Jesus' prayers.

Just an interesting fact here. In Matthew, Mark and Luke only Simon Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God. We don't hear any confession out of Peter in John. However, in John we hear confessions out of various people. John the Baptist says of Jesus in John 1:29, "... 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'" Here's what we read in John 1:45, "Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.'" Nathanael himself bursts out in John 1:49, "... 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'" The Samaritan townspeople of Sychar say to the woman at the well in John 4:42, "... 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard

for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.” Then, there’s Martha’s confession of faith. It’s as powerful as anyone else’s.

And after Martha’s confession, things moved on to the tomb where Lazarus was buried. First, Lazarus’ sister, Mary, met Jesus and rebuked Him the same way Martha had. John 11:33, “. . . ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’” Now, when Jesus saw the suffering, it moved Him also. And so, we come to the shortest verse in the entire bible, John 11:35, “Jesus wept.”

Then two more things happened. We read in John 11:36-37, “36 So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’ 37 But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?’” That was a hidden rebuke. But, of course, Jesus knew what they were thinking. And from our human vantage point, it’s not unreasonable thinking.

Then, when Jesus ordered the stone moved away from the mouth of the tomb, Martha could only think that He wanted to go in to pay His final respects. Thus, we read in John 11:39, “. . . Martha . . . said to him, ‘Lord by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.’” The stench of death is very gagging. But Jesus wasn’t interested in going in. He was going to have Lazarus come out. Thus, Jesus responded to Martha in John 11:40, “. . . ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?’” It’s clear that no one in the group, not even Martha, the strongest believer there, had any clue what Jesus could do.

And so we come to a critical moment. John 11:41-42, “41. . . Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.’” Jesus’ statement confirms what Martha already knew and confessed. The Father always — always — listened and responded to the prayers of Jesus. The others there, didn’t believe that or know it — yet.

The reason that Jesus gave at the end of His prayer, “that they may believe that you sent me” is most important. There is one question about Jesus that overarches the Gospel of John. Jesus: where did you come from? Weeks ago, we saw Nicodemus confess that Jesus comes from God.

And then there is a statement that overarches the Gospel of John. God sent Jesus. John wants us to know that there are two critical things anyone who would be saved for righteous eternal life must believe: Yahweh sent Jesus and Jesus came from the Father in heaven above. He came from outside this dimension of the world into this dimension. And if we’re convinced of that, we can then call upon Jesus’ Name with confidence.

Now, just like with the healing of the man born blind, some in the crowd who saw Lazarus step out of the tomb somehow couldn’t believe their lying eyes. Instead of praising God; instead of falling at Jesus’ feet in worship, they ran off to tell the Pharisees and the rest of the Jewish religious leadership.

Who ever had heard of the healing of a man born blind? Who had ever heard of a man being resuscitated after being dead for four days. These were and are mighty miracles. And they weren’t fake miracles. Along with all the other things Jesus did and said, it should have been enough to convince anyone.

However, we have to remember something. Satan is very religious. Indeed, he wants people to worship him, either directly or by not worshipping Yahweh. Indeed, Satan interfered with Israel’s worship for centuries — getting them to worship other gods instead

of Yahweh. And when Yahweh finally overcame that problem for Israel, Satan took a different tack. He set things up so that when Messiah Jesus appeared, there would be groups within Israel that would reject Him, especially the Jewish leadership.

For, as soon as the news of Lazarus reached the leadership, a council was called. And so they said in John 11:47-48, “47. . . ‘What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. 48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.’” Now, it’s clear from such talk that these people knew a real miracle had taken place, as we said above. But, it’s the talk of men who have no trust in God. If Jesus had been sent by God, and He was, and is, God come from above, why didn’t they think God would have a plan to take care of the Roman problem through Jesus? The only answer is that Satan had captured their thinking.

But then it was clear that even when Satan captures human thinking, the Will of God must prevail. For, Caiaphas the high priest prophesied that one man would have to die for the nation. And that’s exactly what is prophesied of Messiah in Isaiah 53. Therefore, Satan stupidly led the Jewish leadership into the very opposition to Jesus that would result in Jesus’ crucifixion. Only Jesus’ crucifixion resulted in the destruction of Satan’s grip on humanity. Like every evil being, Satan is a fool to think He can oppose Yahweh.

Now, Lazarus was resuscitated from the dead just before Passover. Therefore, when Jesus entered Jerusalem for the Passover feast, He was greeted triumphantly on what we call Palm Sunday. And we read in John 12:17-19, “17 The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. 18 The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. 19 So the Pharisees said to one another, ‘You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.’” These dimwits should have been going after Him themselves. But they couldn’t.

One last thing. We read in John 12:9-11, “9 When the large [Passover] crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there [in Bethany], they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 10 So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, 11 because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.”

That’s a really good plan. Destroy the evidence. As far as we know, they never got to Lazarus. They did get to Jesus. But that created even greater problems for them. News of Jesus’ bodily resurrection from the dead drew even more people to Him. He was far more powerful after death than before.

So, finally we come to us. If you’ve been here the Sundays of Lent, you’ve heard the testimony from John’s Gospel about Jesus. What do you think of someone who says, “I AM the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”? Do you believe that Jesus backed up His statement by resuscitating Lazarus from the dead? Do you believe He backed up His statement Himself by being resurrected from the dead? Is He the Christ who came into the world for the likes of you and me? Is He a liar, a lunatic or the Lord? That’s the question. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the ESV.