

2023.03.26 Sermon to post 5th Sunday in Lent ©Gyllian Davies†

Lazarus. Do you think Lazarus' life was different after what happened? And if it was different how do you think it was different? Do you think he was like a new person? Was his perspective on life transformed? John doesn't tell us. Lazarus came out of the tomb, wrapped in burial cloths. That's it. Cut.

There is one legend about him that says he never smiled again as he was haunted by the sight of all the unredeemed souls he had seen while he was dead.

For myself, I think if that happened to me I would live in a state of awe that Jesus loved me that much to raise me back to life AND that I was indeed alive again - what an amazing, grace-filled miracle!

So what do *you* think? if you had died and were raised again as Lazarus was - would you be changed? How do you imagine you'd be different? I know of one true story about that:

I've been out of town for a few weeks and when I return my friend, Kathleen, says, "You'll never believe what happened while you were gone. It's like a fairy tale become real. My mother-in-law dies of a heart attack and the EMT's are about to give up on reviving her when... success! Her heart resumes beating and she's breathing again. Then she tells us this story of what happens to her while she's dead. She arrives in a place of great beauty and great light where she feels bathed in love. It's the most beautiful thing that has ever happened to her. Then she's shown her life as she's lived it and given two choices - one she can remain in this place of great beauty where she feels bathed in love. Or, two, she can return and choose to live her life differently for however much time she still has.

She chooses to return. Who was she before? A desperately unhappy, angry, complaining person who could see no good or beauty in any person or situation. Who does she become? Someone else! During her remaining years she becomes known for her kindness, her generosity, her love of beauty. She makes arrangements of flowers for people to enjoy in the seniors' home where she lives. She is constantly on the lookout for ways to make the lives of others easier, happier, gentler. She assists the care aides whenever they need a helping hand and she can never say enough good things about all the people around her. When she dies (again!) a few years later there are many many people grieving the passing of such a loving and kind person.

Of course that was a complete 360 degree change in how she lived. I suppose that might not have applied to Lazarus. But maybe it did. We don't really know. What that story tells us, that true story, is that there's no change that's too great after dying and coming to life again. And in a way that's what we've experienced over the past few years. In two different ways, and for some of us in a third way we have died and come back to life again. The first way was Covid. If you remember back to the beginning of Covid, the first twelve months or so, we were scared, weren't we. We were scared! Do you remember that? And now when someone says they have Covid we're not

scared. We're concerned. We know people still die. But we also know for most people it's like a nasty flu. And we are different because of that. We are different because of Covid.

The second way we've died and are coming back is through the news from the bishop that we're going to have to find ways to be a church without a full time priest. That's huge. That's really different from how it's always been here. We cannot continue in the same way. We will be forced to change by circumstances outside our control. Again. And the third way some of us have experienced a kind of death is through the death of their spouse - the person who was their best friend, their soulmate, their life companion for many, many years. And then they're gone. And life is different. And for a few of us there's been a fourth way when they've had to move a spouse into care. And they could no longer be waking up with them every morning, going to sleep with them every night, and sharing their lives in the daytime. Again life is different. And each person has to figure what that means and how to go on in a new way, not like before. Surely that's what happened to Lazarus. Surely he could not go on as he had before because life was different. He was reborn. And what about us? We have a choice. We can be reborn too. But in order to be reborn we have to die to our former ways of doing things. We have to acquiesce to this: our old ways no longer work.

And amazingly there is a silver lining here; there really is. We've discovered we're capable of all kinds of things we didn't believe we could do. We can hold meetings on Zoom. We can hold hybrid meetings with some people present in the room and others beaming in on Zoom. We can livestream services. And there's more if we look around us. Look at our lives before and after. Do you see what I see? These changes have shaken us out of our complacency. We've been nudged into a greater awareness. We've had our eyes opened to the abundance of generosity and beauty, kindness and self-sacrifice, of being alive in ways that we weren't before. Our capacity for gratitude has been expanded. The place within us where we hold grief has been deepened, it has been carved out and as a result I believe we are wiser. Let me read you some beautiful words about that from Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*:

Then a woman said, Speak to us of Joy and Sorrow.

And he answered:

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.

*And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises
was oftentimes filled with your tears.*

And how else can it be?

*The deeper that sorrow carves into your being,
the more joy you can contain.*

*When you are joyous, look deep into your heart
and you shall find it is only that*

which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.

*When you are sorrowful look again in your heart,
and you shall see that in truth you are weeping
for that which has been your delight.*

I hope and pray that as we move forward remember the balance of joy and sorrow.

I hope and pray that when our complacency has been shaken up and sluffed off to some extent, that what takes its place comes from deeper awareness and integrity, comes from a faith-filled willingness to consider new things. Because that's exactly what we need as we encounter these challenging times. As we discover and exercise our own resiliency, our own ability to change and to do things in new ways, we enhance our potential to actually find those new ways that we need and embrace them. We increase the likelihood that we are hearing the guidance God is giving us for our way forward. It's the new life that Jesus invites us to be born into. What are we waiting for?

Amen.