

I Need a Miracle, part 5 – “Dead Man Breathing”

Scripture: John 11

What a week it has been! Bellaire was well represented at the Middle School Camp at Lake Louise in Boyne Falls, with nine campers and one dean (yours truly). I want to again thank this congregation for your support, in scholarships and prayers, as we made this investment in the faith of our youth.

As a reminder, my family leaves for Germany tomorrow, and in my absence, Pastor Tom Ash will be on call for any pastoral emergencies. I am deeply appreciative of Tom and Jean, as well as Pastor Carl Greene, for filling in while my family reconnects with our German roots for a while, and while I finish my second seminary class this summer. Tom's family will also lead worship on August 6th, and I will be back here to serve communion before returning once more to Lake Louise for Elementary Bear Camp. Add into the mix Vacation Bible School, the Rubber Ducky Festival, and a few other summer surprises, and you can tell, we will be very busy over the next few weeks.

It is important in our busy-ness not to forget to pray. When I was first appointed here, I promised that if someone ever reminded me that it was time to pray, I would pay them a dollar. I haven't given out many of those dollars lately, but I remind you that deal is still valid. Would you please join me in prayer now?

Dear God, we simply thank you for this day in which we live and move and breathe. This life you have given us is not to be taken for granted, for you have created us with a purpose: to worship you. Grant that we might feel the presence of your Holy Spirit in these moments now, as we consider how your word speaks to us. Give us your grace. Give us your mercy. Show us the eternal life that is found in Jesus Christ. We pray this in his precious name. Amen.

Watching lambs being born is a sight to behold. When I was young, I watched my dad help sheep while they were in labor. It was messy, but amazing. These poor little creatures seemed so helpless at first, but within a few hours, they could stand and move. Some of the lambs my father delivered, however, needed more help than just coming out. Some of them were stillborn. I vividly remember my dad giving CPR to newborn lambs, and I can also remember how more than one of them, against all odds, were resuscitated, and after a good coughing fit, seemed to come back to life. It was amazing to watch something that seemed impossibly dead actually begin breathing.

For many of us, death first comes into our lives when a pet dies. Unfortunately for my children this week, my dad's hunting dog died, and it was our first real moment of grief as a family. I remember as a child when some of my favorite pets died, and what that taught me about grief. I remember at my grandmother's funeral, and later at my grandfather's funeral, how much I missed them, and how much I wished I could have them back.

Many of us have felt that way. There is something about the finality of death that we resist. In our grief, we go through shock and denial. We don't want it to be true. We all have an inherent desire for life. It is why we were created. We want to live in relationships and family and community. This is a good desire, one that God has given us.

And I think that is why for many of us who have experienced grief, the story of Lazarus is at once comforting and confusing, even frustrating. This is, after all, the story of the resurrection of a dead man, but the question, as always, is, what does this miracle tell us about God, and what does this miracle tell us about ourselves?

I invite you to follow along with me in your pew bibles. Again, we are looking at John 11.

The first thing we notice is there is a strange lack of urgency on the part of Jesus. Everyone around him is anxious. Lazarus' family is anxious, because he is sick and dying. That makes sense. Fewer things in our life make us more upset than when our loved ones are failing. Jesus was even told, "The one you love is sick." Lazarus was a dear friend of Jesus. So why did Jesus wait?

Seems like we ask God this question all the time, don't we? "Why aren't you moving, God? Why don't you respond, when my need is so great?" The urgency strikes us hard. We must do something, now. Right away. Any delay might be fatal.

And in this story, Jesus waits two whole days after finding out Lazarus is sick. His disciples are also anxious, although for a different reason. They are afraid of the Sanhedrin, the Jews in authority, who want to kill Jesus. It seems like everyone is on edge, except Jesus.

But Jesus doesn't worry. God's timing is always perfect. After two days, Jesus heads out. He tells his disciples, "Don't worry, Lazarus is only sleeping." They think, "Then what's the problem? Won't he just wake up and feel better?"

Jesus clarifies, "No, Lazarus is really dead." And check this out. Jesus says, "and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe." (verse 15).

Now, there is a really strange thought. It is better for the disciples that Jesus did not show up when he was first called. Have you ever thought, in your urgency, that God might do something amazing if we just hold on a little longer? That is a tough thing to do.

It turns out that Lazarus' sisters also found it difficult to wait. In fact, when

Jesus arrives, he gets a tongue lashing, first from Martha, who came out to the road to meet him, and then from Mary, who waited at the house. Twice, the scripture records people criticizing Jesus. "If you had been there, my brother would not have died." (verses 21 and 32.) That's a cry I can understand. "God, if had shown up, this would not have happened. Why did you allow this, God?" Everyone has had that thought before.

But Jesus' response to Martha is the point on which the whole story hinges. Let's look at that section. (verses 21-26)

²¹"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;²⁶and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Do you believe this? In the face of death, do you believe in resurrection? That is no idle question. Jesus is not saying, "Someday, we will understand. Someday, this will make sense. Someday, death won't matter anymore." NO. Jesus is saying, "I am the resurrection. I am the life." Jesus is right here, right now, standing before Martha saying, "I am the answer. You do not have to wait anymore. You must only believe."

Martha's response is a testament to her faith. (Verse 27) "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." Wow. If only we all could answer with such faith.

So Mary comes out of the house to meet Jesus. And the next part is as miraculous as it is confusing. Remember, Jesus knows what he is going to do. He told the disciples, Lazarus' illness would not end in death. God would glorify Jesus through this sickness. But read with me from verse 32 to 37.

³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

³⁵ Jesus wept.

³⁶ Then 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 have kept this man from dying?"

Jesus was troubled in spirit? Jesus wept? What?! Why would Jesus weep in the face of a certain miracle? I can tell you why. Because, even though Jesus was God, Jesus was also human. And just like us, when faced with death and despair, he is troubled. He mourned his friend. One Bible translation (AMP) says, he was moved to the point of anger. Jesus knew there was a battle between life and death. He saw his friends grieving, and he grieving with them. Jesus knew what sorrow was all about. He was not aloof and distant. He was a participant. He loved his friends. And he felt their pain.

But this is where the miracle comes. He tells them to remove the stone. That's an odd request. It's a heavy stone to keep animals and grave robbers out. Besides, the dead body has been there four days, and as the KJV puts it, "he stinketh." But I get it. Jesus never did anything haphazardly. Every word, every

action was deliberate. Jesus wanted to show them the proof of his miracle. He prayed, and he shouted with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" No one could claim it was a hoax. The man was dead four days – he was not in a coma. He had not fainted. He had not taken a 96 hour nap. The man was dead. Everyone knew it. So try, if you can, to imagine their amazement when the dead man comes out breathing, wrapped like a mummy, but very much alive, and, hopefully, no longer stinky. This surely would have blown everyone away. You want to talk about glory? I'll show you glory. Aside from the resurrection of Jesus himself, this is the greatest miracle in the New Testament, if not in the whole Bible itself.

This is good news, great news, for Lazarus and his family. But what about us? How can a story of a dead man breathing be good news to us today?

It comes down to resurrection. In each of us is a desire for life to never end. At camp this week, I had a long conversation with some of the boys about what happens to us when we die. The short answer is, I don't know, because I haven't died yet. But the longer and more satisfying answer is, there is going to be a resurrection. Yes, there is a heaven and there is a hell, and we can talk about those later, but this story is absolute proof that one day, after our hearts stop beating, after our lungs stop drawing breath, Jesus will miraculously bring us back to life, and we stand before him. That is the hope of the Christian church. That is the message that has been preached for almost 2,000 years.

It is this hope that must awaken us from our spiritual slumber. There are some who right now live as though they are dead. Some live as though they have no hope. Oh, sure, they are alive, as far as biology is concerned. But they do not have abundant life. They are dead in their sins.

Jesus speaks to all of us those amazing words: “Lazarus, come forth! Eric, come forth! John, come forth! Jane, come forth! Come to life!” Christ wants to do CPR on our souls, and when we find that eternal life in him, we are forever changed. Death and sin are no match for the Author, Creator, and Sustainer of Life!

It is so simple to come to Jesus, and yet so many choose to remain in their caves, or their graves, as it were. Do you know what it means to have eternal life? It means you acknowledge that God created you. That God loves you. That you have sinned and messed up. You have lived for yourself instead of God. And when you admit that, Jesus walks into your life and does a miracle. He restores you. You learn that you have a purpose greater than anything you have ever known. And you have eternal life in him, so that on that great day of Resurrection, you will stand before Jesus and say, “Lord Jesus, you are the Messiah, the Son of God.”

Jesus said “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” It is his question to you. And I pray that your answer is, “Yes, I believe.”

Memory Verse: Isaiah 26:19a (CSB)

“Your dead will live; their bodies will rise.

Awake and sing, you who dwell in the dust!”

Reflection Questions:

1. How have you experience death and grief in your life? Have you

questioned why God seemed like he didn't show up?

2. What do you believe happens when you die? Why do you believe that?
3. The Bible teaches that there will be a general Resurrection at the end of time. What would you hope to say when you stand before the Risen Christ?
4. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life." Do you believe this? What difference does it make in your life?
5. Whom do you know that needs to hear about resurrection?