

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Priest-in-Charge

Lessons:ⁱ

First Lesson: Here beginneth the twelfth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.ⁱⁱ

“And in that day thou shalt say, O LORD, I will praise thee: though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst me. Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the LORD JEHOVAH is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation. Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation. And in that day shall ye say, Praise the LORD, call upon his name, declare his doings among the people, make mention that his name is exalted. Sing unto the LORD; for he hath done excellent things: this is known in all the earth. Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion: for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-first verse of the eleventh Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.ⁱⁱⁱ

“. . . Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee. Jesus saith [SETH] unto her, Thy brother shall rise again. Martha saith [SETH] unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this? She saith [SETH] unto him, Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world. And when she had so said, she went her way, and called Mary her sister secretly, saying, The Master is come, and calleth for thee. As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly, and came unto him. Now Jesus was not yet come into the town, but was in that place where Martha met him. The Jews then which were with her in the

house, and comforted her, when they saw Mary, that she rose up hastily and went out, followed her, saying, She goeth unto the grave to weep there. Then when Mary was come where Jesus was, and saw him, she fell down at his feet, saying unto him, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled, And said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept. Then said the Jews, Behold how he loved him! And some of them said, Could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died? Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it. Jesus said, Take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith [SETH] unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days. Jesus saith [SETH] unto her, Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God? Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me. And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith [SETH] unto them, Loose him, and let him go.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

The New Testament Lesson for today talks about what we call a miracle. Interestingly, that’s not what St. John calls it. He uses a word

which the Revised Standard Version correctly translates by the English word “sign”.^v The raising of Lazarus is the last of seven such signs in the fourth Gospel that reveal the identity and the power of Jesus.

As modern people we live in a technologically-oriented world. When we witness something we do not understand we wonder, “How did that happen?”

The ancients lived in a spiritually-oriented world. For them, the question was not “How did it happen?” but “Why did it happen?” We want to know how everything works; they wanted to know what everything means. There is nothing wrong with being curious, but I would like to suggest that the question of meaning is ultimately more important than the question of technological structure.

The meaning of the raising of Lazarus from the dead is revealed in the exchange with which the lesson begins. Martha says to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Jesus responds, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha says, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” And Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.”

The power to overcome death is not a power that Jesus will acquire later. He was born with that power. It is part of His makeup. It is part of His identity. “I am the resurrection,” He says. Present tense; not future.

All the evil in the world, according to the Eden story, is the result of sin. So when Jesus was asked to heal a man who could not walk, He said, “Your sins be forgiven.” By releasing the man from sin, Jesus released him from the bondage of his handicap. Likewise the power to overcome death is the power to overcome sin. “The last enemy to be destroyed,” according to St. Paul, “is death.” So it is appropriate that the raising of Lazarus constitutes the last of the seven signs in St. John’s Gospel.

It was the custom in those days to wrap a corpse in a shroud, some bandages, and a face cloth. It was also the custom to roll a stone across

the entrance to the tomb in order to seal it. That's how Jesus was buried. But when Jesus rose from the dead, He left the grave wrappings behind. When Lazarus was raised, he still had the restrictive wrappings on.

It is always appropriate to look for symbolism in the fourth Gospel, and it especially appropriate here. The restrictive wrappings represent the bondage of sin which keeps us from becoming what God intends for us to be. It is that same bondage to sin that makes us subject to death. So it is appropriate to wrap a corpse in restrictive clothing, which represents the restrictive nature of sin and death.

When Jesus rose from the dead, He left those bindings behind. When Lazarus rose from the dead, he was still bound. Unlike Jesus, Lazarus would one day die again, be wrapped in grave clothes and buried again. But the point had been made: Jesus has power, not only over death but over sin as well.

When Lazarus emerged from the tomb, Jesus said, "Unbind him and let him go." But that didn't happen until Lazarus had made a valiant attempt to obey the command of Jesus; "Lazarus, come out."

Now what do you suppose would have happened if Lazarus had not come out? Suppose he had simply given up and given in to sin and death? Suppose he had said, "I hear you calling, Jesus, but I can't do what you want me to do. I'm sorry but you're asking too much. I just can't help myself." If that had been his attitude, Lazarus would have continued just to rot away.

That's pretty much the attitude a lot of us take when we hear Jesus calling us to a life of purity and righteousness. We hear the Sermon on the Mount and we say, "I can't live like that." We hear Jesus say that our righteousness must exceed that of those who strictly keep the Jewish law. We know we can't do that on our own, but, like Lazarus, we have to try. We have to struggle, just as Lazarus struggled to get up and walk out of the tomb, still bound by his grave clothes.

The commands of God carry with them the power to obey. When God ordered the earth to bring forth life, the earth acquired the power to do it. So likewise when Jesus ordered the lame man to get up and walk,

the man acquired the power to do it. The command of the Son is like the command of the Father. Do you believe that?

The lame man believed it and acted on his faith. Lazarus believed it and struggled to act on that belief.

St. James points out in his Epistle that belief without action is dead. So Jesus commands Lazarus to act on his faith: “Lazarus come out.” Lazarus obeys, and in so doing demonstrates the truth of what Jesus has said to Martha: “He who believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.”

We, like, Lazarus are all wrapped up in our sins. Those sins restrict our ability to become what we were created to be. We are unable to free ourselves from that bondage. But neither sin nor death can stand before the power of Christ. And we, like Lazarus, can tap into that power by struggling to do what the Lord commands.

Let’s not make a lot of excuses for not being what God wants us to be and not doing what God wants us to do. If we can’t do it, it’s either because we don’t want to do it, or because we lack faith in our Lord’s ability to enable us to do what He commands.

Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.” Then he asks Martha, “Do you believe this?” And Martha replies, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God.”

Jesus asks everyone that same question. And whoever answers as Martha did has no excuse for disobedience.

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ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxiv (PECUSA 1928/1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Isaiah 12: 1-6 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. John 11: 21-44 (KJV).*

^{iv} *St. John 11:25-26 (KJV).*

^v *The Greek word semeion refers to a “deed having in itself an explanation of something hidden” or “a token of that which distinguishes a person or thing from others” (James Strong; see also Arndt and Gingrich).*