

“The Dead Man”
First UMC of Pocatello
The First Sunday in Lent
March 6, 2022

John 12:1-8 (Lazarus)

After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the religious leaders in Jerusalem feared that his ministry would look to Rome like the seed of another Jewish insurrection, so they set plans in motion to arrest him. He had shown his power over death; for that, ironically, he would need to die. John 11:53-54 says, “[F]rom that day on they planned to kill him. So Jesus no longer walked about in public...but he left for the region near the desert...and there he remained” (NAB). For several months, Jesus hides.

But the festival of Passover approaches, and with it, Jesus’ appointed time. He emerges from seclusion in the desert to go join his people in Jerusalem. He knows what terrible things await him there. And precisely because he knows what is to come, his arrest and suffering and execution, he stops one last time in the small town of Bethany, two miles outside the city, to spend a final night with his greatest friends.

Under the cover of darkness, he and his disciples come down out of the hills and knock at that familiar door. It opens, and *there* – there is Mary, the one who wept; and Martha, the one who believed; and Lazarus, the one who had been raised. With a shout of joyous recognition, they greet Jesus, practically drag him inside, take his cloak and direct him to a cushion by the table. They call on their neighbors and begin preparing a feast.

What unfolds is, to me, one of the most captivating and bittersweet scenes in all the Gospels. Christ has sought out the company of his

friends. In this home, he is surrounded by light and laughter, the recipient of hospitality and love. Wine is poured and bread is broken; conversation flows and memories are shared. Mary pours her costly perfume upon his feet and dries them with her hair. “The house [is] filled with the fragrance” of her lavish offering.

And yet, beyond this home’s happy walls, the darkness thickens. Even within, in moments of silence, a heavy understanding that this night is their last grows passes between the companions. The betrayer himself is there, standing off to the side, either unwilling or unable – who can say? – to be drawn into the others’ communion.

We are going to remain with this passage for the next five weeks, experience it from the vantage point of its various characters – Lazarus, Martha, Mary, Jesus, and Judas. As the story does its work on us, my prayer is that we will be prepared, as Jesus was prepared, for the events of Holy Week. During this season of Lent, we seek refuge in Lazarus’ house, so that we might have, as Jesus had, a holy memory to carry forward into the dying and rising to come.

This morning, let us focus our attention on Lazarus, the man reclining at the table with Jesus, his friend and – quite literally, quite recently – his Savior. But first, let us pray. **[Pray]**

I’d like to begin by lifting up a very technical issue with this passage.

The English New Testaments we hold in our hands are translations of manuscripts written in ancient Greek. Some of these manuscripts come in the form of well-preserved books or scrolls, but many are shabby, torn, partial fragments. There is not a single passage of scripture for which anyone in the world possesses the original version written by the original author. History has left us only with *copies*, passed down from generation to generation by scribes, buried in rubble, or preserved in ancient churches and libraries.

With the proliferation of copies come what are called *variants*. It often occurs that, lining up different manuscript copies of the same passage, one finds differences, discrepancies, sometimes subtle and perhaps explainable by an error in the copier's quill-stroke, sometimes conspicuous and obviously the work of intentional editing. But without an original to judge by, how can we know which is 'true'?

Enter *the biblical scholar* whose work it is to weigh the evidence according to the available data and a set of formal rules and then put forward an educated guess as to which reading most closely represents the absent original. In the compiled Greek New Testaments published today, all those supposedly "original" versions are provided in the main text, and the deviant variants are recorded in footnotes. Of course, these are best guesses, and areas of serious uncertainty are duly noted. The whole process, already replete with judgments and interpretations, is completely hidden from us by our cleanly translated and printed leatherbound Bibles. I for one am happy that it is so, and relieved to leave that puzzling work to those uniquely called to it.

However, every once and a while, it's meaningful to go digging – such as here, in John chapter 12 verse 1, because here something significant appears that forces us into a decision about *meaning*. With the exception of the King James Bible, almost all English Bibles follow a dominant manuscript tradition which is translated in the way we heard it a moment ago:

“Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.”

But there *is* a secondary manuscript tradition, a collection of variants, which, if followed, as in the King James, would be translated like this:

“Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, *the dead man*, whom he had raised from the dead.”

Did you hear the difference? “Lazarus, the dead man...”

According to the repressed variants, Lazarus is not simply the one Jesus raised from the dead – he’s The Dead Man whom Jesus raised from the dead.

Which raises the question: Who does the Church think this man is, who sits and eats with Jesus? Is he Lazarus, raised from the dead? Or is he The Dead Man, *nevertheless* raised from the dead? In this new life of his, to what degree does his former “deadness” follow him?

Including the phrase “the dead man” *does* harmonize this verse with the story of Lazarus’s actual raising in chapter 11. In the climactic moment of that story, Jesus stood before the tomb and “cried out in a loud voice, *Lazarus, come out! The dead man*” – the scripture says it – “The dead man came out, tied hand and foot with burial bands, and his face was wrapped in a cloth. So, Jesus said to them, *Untie him and let him go*” (11:43-44, NAB).

So, posed another way, my question is this: Does the name, The Dead Man, get discarded with those grave clothes? Does Lazarus get to simply become Lazarus again, a person touched by the power of God? Or will he always carry about him a whiff of death’s stench? Will he always be remembered as The Dead Man, even though he is dead no longer? The question brings to mind an awkward year of Middle School when certain “friends” of mine continued to refer to me by the name “Gimpy” long after a knee injury had been healed and the brace taken off.

As I said, the original version likely omits that phrase, “the dead man.” It just says, “Lazarus, whom Jesus raised...” Both ways of rendering the scripture represent theologies; in particular, they posit contradictory positions on how much the past sticks with us in our new

life in Christ. To be The Dead Man always, who nevertheless has been raised, strikes me as a theology of atonement, related to our salvation from sin. Paul, St. Augustine, and Luther would approve – each of us is always both a saint and always a sinner, always *dead in sin* yet nevertheless *alive in grace*.

But Lazarus's story isn't about freedom from sin, it's about *freedom from death*. It's about being helped out of the Pit, liberated from that cosmic, indiscriminate force that comes for us all, seeking to strip us of the joy of living, to cast us down and drive us low, to erode us, negate us, make us nothing.

This is why I'm glad the other reading carries the day. Lazarus is the one Jesus *raised from the dead*. His past deadness, his experience of death's power, can no longer stand on its own; it no longer has its own substance or independent meaning apart from the intervention of Jesus' word and work. Death has been taken forever *into* the story of Lazarus's rising, transfigured into a hinge between one life and another. Death is no longer an identity, a name. It is a movement within a bigger, better story.

How could Lazarus continue to say, "Oh yea, I'm the dead guy," while being a breathing, walking, feasting testimony of resurrection? He cannot begin to speak of his dying without telling of how it was overcome. If he were still dead, he would not speak at all.

Why is this important?

Let me bring it down now to that night, that house, that room, that table.

Jesus sits with this man – not The Dead Man, but the man raised from death. He sits with the man he calls Lazarus. And as Jesus talks with him and laughs with him on that special night, as he looks into his face, a face no longer wrapped in a shroud but upon whose eyes and

cheeks the candlelight dances, he cannot help but take courage as he prepares for his own looming encounter with the tomb, with burial bands, with the cold, grasping fist of death.

Perhaps being with his friend that night gave his soul the courage to say: *I will die, but like Lazarus I will not be the Dead Man forever. My Father in heaven, who was at work in me when I raised my friend, will abide with me, will keep my life.*

Simply put, this house is an Easter house in a time before Easter. Lazarus is a lone brightly shining star in an otherwise dark and vacant sky. Yet it is the little light Jesus needs to find his own way.

John's Gospel does not contain the Garden of Gethsemane story. There is no moment when Jesus sinks to the ground in agony, sweats drops of blood, cries out to his Father, and asks that the cup of suffering be taken from him while his disciples abandon him for the oblivion of sleep. Instead, in John, Jesus enters the fateful garden confidently, boldly, at peace. When the band of soldiers comes and Jesus asks them who they're looking for and they say, "Jesus of Nazareth" and he says to them, "I AM," they fall to the ground in terror. Even so, he consents to be taken for the sake of us all.

Is it too far afield to suggest that in that moment of perfect surrender Jesus called to mind the softly illuminated face of his friend, Lazarus, the man who is dead no longer but raised from the dead, who laughs, talks, passes the bread and cup?

Friends, never, ever forget the power of your story. If God has touched and transformed your life, your story is not for you alone, but also for those who will someday come in the night and knock at your door. If you have come, like Lazarus, back from something you never thought you'd come back from, if God has raised you up out of the Pit, it is your joyful duty to throw feasts for those heading toward their own lonesome valley.

So long as you haven't taken your suffering for a new name, but have let it come to rest as a layer of your life under and over and through which the life and love Jesus grows, your face will glow with the light of eternity, and your table will be heaven on earth. Jesus will come to you again and again in the guise of a weary traveler seeking solace and friendship and, most of all, courage. The world doesn't need more Dead Men, but those who have been raised.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.