

**LAZARUS, COME OUT!**  
**John 11:1; 4-7; 17-27; 28-39; 43-50**  
**Preached by Dr. Cahill**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, April 6, 2014**

The reports of people claiming to have had near death experiences seem to give credibility to John's story of Jesus raising up Lazarus from the dead. Despite being declared clinically dead, they live to remember hovering over the operating table while doctors and nurses try to resuscitate their bodies. They also remember being greeted by relatives and friends who previously passed away and seeing that glorious "Light" at the end of a tunnel and then being sadly disappointed when told they must return to the realm of the living.

Some believers think these documented reports of near death experiences prove the Lazarus story is true. They argue if modern medicine can resuscitate a corpse, surely the Son of God could raise the dead. Of course there will always be those who will try to demythologize or debunk the gospel stories because they can't accept anything that runs contrary to the natural law.

But then there's the rest of us who believe if the Son of God wanted to suspend the laws of nature to get our attention, who's to say he can't?

So, I have no problem believing Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead because there's this ultimate truth holding this story together: the mystery of the incarnation, God becoming flesh to live among us filled with grace and truth. If you believe that miracle how could you doubt Christ raised Lazarus from the dead?

Now, on to the story. On the surface it appears Jesus restoring Lazarus to life was purely a good friend's act of compassion. Unlike the other people Jesus healed and raised from the dead, Lazarus and Jesus were best friends, along with his sisters Mary and Martha. He was a frequent guest at their home and you get the sense they were among the few people with whom he could relax and let his hair down.

Even so, it would be a mistake to conclude Jesus used his powers to restore his friend's life for purely personal reasons. Instead, Jesus' actions were intentionally taken to start a chain reaction that would end in his death.

Jesus knew when reports of this miracle spread throughout the countryside, the Religious Establishment in Jerusalem, the Temple Priests, the Scribes and the Pharisees would be beside themselves. They'd tell each other if they let Jesus continue on his merry way winning the people's favor, they'd not only lose their authority but they'd also have to answer to their Roman masters, especially if Jesus suddenly proclaimed himself to be the Messiah, the new king of Israel. If that happened, the Roman army would quickly march on Jerusalem, destroy the Temple and worst of all exile the Jews to the far corners of the Empire.

So the Sadducees, and Pharisees, the Herodians (King Herod's followers) all enemies of each other, went into damage control mode, determined to stamp out the Jesus movement once and for all.

Let's be clear on this. By raising up Lazarus Jesus knew he was giving the Religious Establishment the excuse they needed to get rid of him. He knew the moment he commanded, "Lazarus, come out!" he would be signing his own death warrant. I believe that's why Jesus wept. The people mourning at Lazarus' tomb thought Jesus was weeping because his good friend died. But why would Jesus weep for Lazarus when he knew in mere moments Lazarus would be restored to his sisters, turning their grief into joy?

Could it be that when Jesus he wept he was mourning for himself because he knew his actions that day would culminate in his suffering and death for sins of the world. He knew that as soon as Lazarus took his first step out of the tomb, Jesus took his first step to the cross.

So you see the implications of this story go far beyond the question of whether or not it really happened. More importantly, this story is really about Jesus setting the stage for his own crucifixion by purposely baiting the religious authorities and giving them the ammunition they needed. Very intentionally, Jesus orchestrated the event that would bring about his dying for our sins.

But as we put the story of Jesus raising up Lazarus in the larger context of his rendezvous with the cross, there's still another looming question dwarfing any speculation whether this story is true or not. Here it is: "Are we ready to be the Church God wants us to be?"

It's easy to fault the religious establishment of Jesus' day, especially the Pharisees, for their deification of the status quo and refusing to even consider Jesus' outreach to tax collectors, sinners and Gentiles. Sadly they blinded themselves to what a growing number of outcasts and sinners could already see. Jesus was bringing about a new reformation, transforming the People of the Covenant into something totally new to spread the gospel beyond the confines of Judea to the whole world.

Many thoughtful observers believe our own generation is also on the cusp of a new reformation as God is once again transforming and preparing his People to be agents of grace in our rapidly changing world bringing the gospel to those who still don't know Jesus.

Like it or not, the world is changing and not all of it's for the good. Our job, as latter day members of the religious establishment (remember both Pharisee and Presbyterian begin with a "P") is to make the choice: either dig in our heels and cling to our old comfortable ways, or like Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus, who represented those Pharisees who followed Jesus, welcome the Church's rebirth as God raises us up to heal the sick, raise the dead and kick out demons.

As Christ commanded Lazarus to come out from his tomb, Christ is calling us to come out from our churches to become a community of believers ready to change the world knowing that Christ has already overcome the world.

May God grant us the same wisdom and courage for the facing of this hour and the living of these days he gave his prophets and apostles to carry his message of healing and salvation to a world needing both.