

JESUS LOVES YOU TO LIFE!

Sermon, March 26, 2023

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Text: John 11:1-45

Those of you who text or tweet are familiar with many of the creative acronyms and/or abbreviations used for informal common phrases, such as LOL (*Laugh Out Loud*), ROTFL (*Rolling On The Floor Laughing*), OMG (*Oh My Goodness ... i.e., if you don't want to violate the Third Commandment*), TTYL (*Talk To You Later*), FYI (*For Your Information*), IMHO (*In My Humble Opinion*), and SMH (*Shaking My Head*), to name just a few.. In preparing for this sermon, I came across one I hadn't seen before: LYTD (*Love You To Death*). One source defines this familiar saying as an expression of deep love, which means "My feelings for you are so intense I may die from them," or (more likely) it is an adaptation/abbreviation of the marital vow "till death do us part," or, on a darker and somewhat unnerving note, it might be viewed as a vague threat, particularly if voiced or texted by a creepy stalker.

Well, I like to think of love as something that is life *giving*, not life *ending* or life *threatening*. Hence the sermon title ... Jesus loves us to **life**; He wants to love us to life full, abundant and eternal! That's pretty much the point of my sermon, but I'll go on to preach the rest of it anyway.

Throughout the Bible there are altogether eight accounts, other than the resurrection of Jesus, of individual people being raised from death back to life. The first is found in I Kings 17, where the prophet Elijah revives a widow's son. Second, in II Kings 4, Elijah's successor Elisha revives the Shunammite woman's son. The third account is an almost quirky story in II Kings 13:21 -- a funeral procession is disrupted by Moabite raiders; and the mourners, in their haste to escape, literally throw the body of their dearly departed into the tomb and take off in a panic. Well, the tomb happened to be Elisha's tomb, and as soon as the hurled body touched Elisha's bones, the dead man sprang back to life and, we are told, stood up on his feet! The fourth is in Luke 7, where we read of another interrupted funeral procession, this time in the town of Nain; Jesus has compassion on the mother, walks up to the coffin and says, "Young man, get up!" and we are told "The man sat up and began to talk and Jesus gave him back to his mother." Fifth, Matthew, Mark, Luke all tell the story of Jesus raising Jairus' little daughter, Jairus being the leader of the local synagogue. The sixth account is in Acts 9, where the apostle Peter brings the woman Dorcas back to life. The seventh account is in Acts 20, the almost tragicomic account of the apostle Paul restoring someone to life. Acts 20:9 -- "Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on." Eutychus fell asleep during Paul's long sermon, then fell out of that third story window in which he was sitting, crashed to the ground and was killed. Paul rushed down, threw himself on the young man, and Eutychus came back to life. Then we are told Paul went back upstairs, had a little snack, and continued his sermon until daybreak!

In each of these seven cases thus far, the raising followed very soon after death. In the hot, arid climate of Palestine, bodily decomposition and the lack of refrigeration and other modern mortuary techniques of preservation necessitated that burial follow quickly after the time of death. In fact, we know from the evidence of ancient graves that, due to that haste, people were inadvertently buried alive on more than a few occasions. Skeptics and cynics have argued that maybe these seven people were actually in comatose states, that these weren't resurrections so much as they were resuscitations. However, the eighth Biblical account of one being raised from death is this account of Jesus raising Lazarus. Lazarus had been dead and in the tomb four days, his body would have been well into the process of decay. (*Martha reminds Jesus of this when Jesus requests the stone be taken away, our NIV translations have her saying "By this time there is a bad odor." The KJV puts it a bit more bluntly: "By this time he stinketh."*) No doubt about it, Lazarus was dead. Jesus performed what was arguably His most spectacular and dramatic of miracles by restoring him to life; of all the miracles in John's Gospel, this one receives the fullest treatment.

Lazarus is dead. What took Lazarus' life? We do not know; John doesn't say. We just know that Lazarus grew sick, and died. We are also told that Jesus knew he was sick. We read, "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when He heard that Lazarus was sick, He stayed where He was two more days." During that time, Lazarus died. Jesus says to His disciples, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him up." As John explains, the disciples take Jesus literally. That's understandable. Jesus had told them this sickness wouldn't end in death, and now He is saying Lazarus has fallen asleep, so He must mean natural sleep. So they respond, "But, Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better."

The following excerpt was edited out on the spot due to time constraints, I include it here: In polite society then and now there is an aversion to using the blunt and somewhat abrupt word "death." We use softer euphemisms, e.g., "Passed away." "Departed." 19 years ago nurse Nancy Blasdel told me a euphemism some of her fellow caregivers used: "Celestial discharge." Perhaps

my least favorite: A person leaving a hospital around here is checked in one of three categories: Discharged, Transferred, or ... Expired. Expired! Groceries expire, magazine subscriptions expire, but people ...? Anyway ... Jesus cuts the euphemisms and then tells the disciples plainly, "Lazarus is dead." If Lazarus was at Kent Hospital, perhaps Jesus might have told them, "Lazarus expired. And I'm going there to renew his subscription ... to Life." (which is a bit of a dated joke, since the once immensely popular Life magazine has long since ceased publication, but us older folks will remember it) – End of excerpt

Jesus says to His disciples, "Lazarus is dead. And for your sake I'm glad I was not there, so that you may believe. Now let us go to him." I'm sure the disciples are befuddled. I can imagine them whispering to each other, "Let us go to him? So that we might believe ... what?" Also, Judea was not a safe place for Jesus and the disciples to go at that time. The disciples knew they all faced tremendous danger there; they were understandably reluctant to put their lives at risk. John tells us, "Thomas, called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'" You may remember from past Holy Week sermons that Thomas is the Aramaic word for twin, and Didymus is the Greek word for twin. So, a literal English translation would be, "Twin, called Twin." Now some in church history have taken this to be something of a cynical, pessimistic remark by the man somewhat derisively (and I'm convinced unfairly) known as "Doubting Thomas." "Oh well, we're doomed anyway, we may as well go there and die with him ... it's been nice while it lasted. Sigh." But no, I don't think so. I don't think this was a cynical remark; I think it was Thomas boldly and resolutely saying, "Let's GO WITH HIM, no matter where He leads, no matter what the risk! That's what disciples DO!" Thomas wanted to go wherever Jesus lead, come what may. Doubting Thomas? I prefer Dogged Didymus, or maybe Tenacious Twin. There was a tenacity about him that was determined to follow Jesus no matter what. And at Thomas' urging, they go. They go with Jesus, even if they don't understand Him. They aren't quite sure what's going to happen, they don't know what Jesus is taking them into, but they go with Him ... even if it means putting their lives at risk, they go where He leads.

John makes a point to tell us that Jesus had a special affection for these three siblings, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Jesus had spent much time in their home; they were a very dear family to Him. Yet, in the hour of their dire need ... Jesus stayed where He was two more days, no explanation. He delayed until Lazarus died, He delayed until the men came and removed the body from the home, He delayed until they prepared it for burial and placed it in the tomb. Wouldn't you expect the Bible to tell us, "Jesus loved them, so He dropped everything and rushed to go help them?" That is what we expect. Instead, by inexplicably and seemingly dragging His feet to go see this man He loves, it seems as if Jesus is somewhat paradoxically "LYTD", loving His friend to death, as if the text said, "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus; therefore He let Lazarus die."

Again, Jesus loved these three. Yet in their hour of intense need ... He stayed away. In His perfect wisdom, there are times when Jesus does seem to stay away. Sometimes Jesus delays to act, or refuses to act, as we want Him to act. But, He loves us. No, no, I shouldn't say but ... make that because He loves us. Jesus loves you, and there are times He can and may seem to bring disappointment for His greater purposes. Jesus loves you, therefore difficulty comes to your house like it came to this humble home in Bethany. Jesus loves you, therefore He calls on you to kneel by the grave of your dear one. Jesus loves you, and He really does weep with you as He wept with these sisters. None of it makes a whole lot of sense to us while it is happening. But sometimes the goal of Jesus is not to make sense. His goal is to love you ... to love us ... to **Life**. His goal is to bring those He loves to a deeper, more abiding faith in the One who is the Resurrection and the Life. (By the way: Why did Jesus weep? Even if the others didn't know what He was about to do, Jesus knew He was going to bring Lazarus back. You'd think He'd be grinning ear to ear! Explanation of that is coming on Easter.)

Martha and Mary both say, "If only you had been here, Jesus, then my brother would not have died." Why couldn't things have turned out differently? Why was this tragedy allowed to take place? Because Jesus Christ loved these people. He loved these people, and to them He personally and directly gave this vivid, unique and memorable object lesson, the teaching miracle that would go on to inspire billions down through the years, that in Him, death really doesn't have the last word, **Life** does. Jesus loved them, He loves us, to life. The greatest enemy we face is death itself; death eventually claims everyone and everything. No miracle can ultimately save us from it. Even if a miracle comes, it is only a temporary solution. After all, Lazarus would die again. What those who Jesus loves really need is more than a miracle -- we need a resurrection and the hope of a resurrection ... the faith that will make life eternally new. We need to know that death really is finally and ultimately defeated. We need to know we and our loved ones can indeed have life, life everlasting and full, life that begins even here and now, in Jesus Christ, Who is the Resurrection and the Life. The same Jesus Christ Who loves us does come to us in our grief and tragedy, although He often seems to come late. And He comes with the message that there is a power greater than death, and that power is in Him.

Lazarus died. Jesus raised him back to life. Lazarus eventually died again. And the promise of the resurrection is that the Lord raised him once again; this time, for ever. As He will do for us. For He is the Resurrection and the Life; He who believes in Him will never die ultimately, but will have life everlasting.