

“I Believe in the Resurrection”
John 11:45-53
April 12, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

Jesus performed many miracles during the three and a half years of his public ministry. John chooses only seven to highlight, and the raising of Lazarus from the dead is the final and climactic one. It is an astounding miracle, because Jesus not only raises a dead Lazarus, but a decomposed Lazarus. After four days, the process of decomposition would have been well advanced. When Jesus orders the stone covering the tomb’s opening to be rolled away, the pragmatic Martha reminds him that there will be a bad odor by this time. Most cultures seek to cover the ugliness of death, so that our final memories of a loved one won’t be dominated by something dreadful. Psychologists have discovered that of all five of our senses, the sense of smell connects most directly with the part of the brain controlling our emotions. So the last thing Lazarus’ two sisters wanted was to smell the death of their brother. Had they done so, every future encounter of that smell would have provoked a fresh memory of grief. They want to forget this day, not remember it. But what happens next puts an end to any hope that this day can be forgotten. The stone is rolled away and there is no odor. The voice of Jesus becomes the dominant feature of this day, not the stench of death. As all eyes turn to Jesus, they hear his voice utter a prayer. After prayer, he turns to the tomb and speaks in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” He staggers out in semi-mummy style with the grave cloths wrapped around him. “Is this truly Lazarus?” everyone must be wondering. After he is unwrapped, all can see that it is indeed Lazarus.

I want us to look today not at the miracle itself, but the reaction to it. This is the kind of miracle we might expect would establish once and for all Jesus’ messianic claims. Surely all would believe him now. His brothers had been convinced that such a miracle as this would make Jesus famous. Back in chapter 7, they had urged him to go and do something just like this. **“So his brothers said to him, ‘Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world’”** (7:3-4). We think the same thing today. We imagine that if God were to do something undeniably miraculous, everyone would believe in him. That wasn’t the case in Jesus’ day, and human nature being what it is, it would not be the case in our day as well. We see two responses to Jesus’ miracle of raising Lazarus—one of unbelief and one of faith. Let’s look more carefully at both of them now.

I. Unbelief and Its Self-Centeredness

I think most of us believe the same thing Jesus' half brothers believed. We believe that if Jesus would perform his miracles in a more open manner among the powerful and influential people, that everyone would believe. What if God showed up on Capital Hill and stood before Congress and offered to do whatever they wanted to bring peace to the world. Captured by the cameras of C-Span, they would ask for the death of tyrannical rulers everywhere and the institution of free democracies throughout the world. Then over the next few days and weeks, we would read of just such things happening around the world. Do you think that would convince people to believe in Jesus? It didn't do so in this passage. What it did was to polarize people. It got rid of the middle ground and forced people to declare themselves either for or against Jesus. John tells us that many who witnessed the raising of Lazarus believed in him, while others reported this to the Pharisees, who responded by deciding to put Jesus to death.

Jesus had known this would be the result of such a public miracle. This was not the first time he had raised someone from the dead. But on previous occasions, it was not done in such a public manner. He had often urged people to keep quiet about a miracle. But here he seems to go out of his way to raise Lazarus in as public a manner as possible. Bethany was only a short two-mile walk from Jerusalem. This family seems to be well-known, and funerals always draw large crowds when the one dying is both well-known and relatively young, and the location is accessible to many people. Jesus performs this miracle in such a public arena, knowing that it will provoke the crisis that will lead to his death. In just a few days, Jesus will be hanging on a cross. He gave life to Lazarus, but at a high cost to himself.

We think that the reason people don't believe in Jesus is the lack of evidence. If God would only supply clearer evidence, then more people would believe. The reaction to this miracle suggests otherwise. We read in the next chapter of something that happened a few days after the raising of Lazarus. A large crowd came to see both Jesus and Lazarus. **"So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus"** (12:10-11). They were presented with clear evidence, and they responded not by believing but by wanting to get rid of the evidence. Jesus knows that our problem is a deeper one than lack of evidence, and our text tells us what that deeper problem is.

The ruling Jewish council was called the Sanhedrin, and they were the ones who, even though they were presented with indisputable evidence of Lazarus' resurrection, determined to kill Jesus nonetheless. These were religious men, balanced between the conservative Pharisees and the more liberal Sadducees. Never once does someone raise the obvious question, "Could it be that Jesus really is the Messiah? After all, he raised from the dead a decomposing body." On the contrary, by the end of the meeting, they all agree that Jesus must be killed. Remember that many of these men were Pharisees and were scrupulous about keeping even the most minute part of Scripture. For example, Exodus 23:19 records a very simple command: **"Do not cook a young goat in its**

mother's milk.” Not only did the Jewish leaders want to keep from cooking a young goat in its mother's milk, but in order to make sure they never even got close to violating that command, they determined to avoid all mixture of dairy and meat products. All kosher dietary laws come from the expansion of that verse. People that scrupulous are willing now to do something that is blatantly and repeatedly forbidden in the Scriptures—the murder of another human being. Why? Where does such evil come from, and is the evil of our own hearts of a similar nature?

John records the basic drift of their deliberations, which reveal to us something of their innermost motives. It becomes clear that the thing most important to them is the preservation of their own positions of authority. The original language of the New Testament, Greek, has a way of emphasizing some words, and the words that receive the emphasis in this sentence is the word *our*. **“The Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation”** (v. 48). The core desire of their hearts was for the preservation of their positions of authority. They had a self-centered agenda, and anyone getting in the way of that agenda, including God himself, must be removed. The thing that keeps us from believing in God isn't the lack of evidence, but the core commitment to self. Perhaps an illustration will help.

Illustration: Back in 1978, *Double Eagle II*, a large helium balloon, and her crew of three lifted off from Maine headed for Paris, France. One of the things needed for the balloon to stay aloft during the later stages of the flight is ballast, which is simply weights that are dropped over the side when you need to rise. As they approached Europe after six days of flying, one of the crewmen wrote the following in his diary: “We have been expending ballast wisely, but as we neared land, not cheaply . . . over went such gear as tape recorders, radios, film magazines, sleeping bag, lawn chairs, most of our water, food, and the cooler it was in.” Quite obviously, the balloonist will throw over first the items regarded as least necessary, and reserve for the last that which is most valuable to him.

Here's the question that will diagnose the evil of the heart: if your life is like such a balloon flight, what is the last thing to go overboard? For the members of the Sanhedrin, it was their position as leaders. They simply couldn't imagine living without that. The heart of evil isn't something blatantly vile, but rather a core commitment to self. What is your core commitment? What is it you can't imagine living without? What is it, that if threatened, you would do anything to keep, including something you know to be wrong? It could be success, approval, money, appearance or any number of things that are not bad in themselves, but become bad because of the trust we place in them. I met a man once who was over eighty years old, and every time I saw him he made mention of one of his accomplishments while in college over sixty years ago. His core commitment was a sixty-year old success, and he held on to it more tenaciously than holding on to the Lord. It is this core commitment to self that is the heart of evil and the heart of unbelief. Only God belongs in the place of our core commitment, and this

brings us to our next point.

II. Belief and Its Treasuring of Jesus

If unbelief treasures self-accomplishment, belief treasures Jesus. Before looking at the treasure he is, let me point out how this belief was not an easy thing for Lazarus' two sisters, Mary and Martha. We sometimes encounter a view that says that these ancient people were superstitious, and they just naturally believed in such things as resurrection. But we can see in this passage that they found the idea of a resurrection just as unlikely as we would. Their faith would not go further than believing that if Jesus had been there before Lazarus' death, Jesus could have healed him. Both Mary and Martha say that twice. When Jesus tells her directly, **"Your brother will rise again"** (v. 23), she can only see some distant and remote resurrection. And when Jesus orders the stone covering the tomb to be rolled away, Martha feels it necessary to remind him of the odor.

Their faith was also challenged by Jesus' delay in coming to them. When Lazarus became ill, they immediately sent word to Jesus, desiring that he should come and heal the one he loved. But Jesus deliberately delayed (v. 6) coming to him. We can imagine Mary and Martha taking a break from their care for their gravely ill brother, looking down the road for the familiar and welcome sight of Jesus coming to bring his healing. But he never came. Jesus' failure to arrive before Lazarus' death seems to be uppermost in their minds. In separate meetings with Jesus, the first thing both sisters said when they saw Jesus was identical. **"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died"** (v. 21, 32). Jesus' enemies were even more direct in their criticism. **"But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?'"** (v. 37). Many stumble at this same point today, finding it difficult to believe in God because he seems not to have taken the action we wanted him to take to relieve our distress.

Despite these obstacles, Mary and Martha believed in Jesus because they came to treasure him. Let me point out several things they learned to treasure, and that we can as well. I notice first that Jesus had a ministry of both truth and love to the two sisters. He comes to Martha with the truth that he is the resurrection and the life. He speaks words to her. But to Mary, he doesn't speak. He simply weeps with her. He does so because a mark of love is to weep with those who weep. He weeps even though he knows he is about to raise her brother from the dead. We need a God like this, one who is both truth and love. We could never trust him if he were only one of these. If God just feels our pain but doesn't tell us the truth, we couldn't trust him with running our lives. He may be well-intentioned, but well-intentioned people can mess up. If he tells the truth but doesn't sympathize with us, then he is distant. How can we know that he will use his truth and power for our benefit unless we know he is for us? We need a God who is both truth and love, and we have just such a God in Jesus.

Jesus is also a treasure because he is our champion in the fight against our great enemy, death. The view of the Bible is very different from our modern, materialistic view of death, which sees it merely as something natural and normal. The Bible says that death is our common enemy. Many of us have been touched by the death of a loved one. If you haven't already, you will be. One day, either I'm going to stand beside Wendy's coffin as it is lowered into the ground, or she will stand beside mine. Either I will stand beside one of my children's coffins, or they will stand beside mine. It feels so dreadful to think of that loved one being placed six feet under. It is not supposed to be that way, and our champion comes to the rescue. Jesus is angry at death, though this is somewhat obscured in our English translations. Verse 33 says that when Jesus saw Mary and all her friends weeping, **"he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled."** D. A. Carson says it should be translated "outraged in spirit." The same word is used in Greek outside the Bible to refer to the angry snorting and bellowing of an animal. Jesus is angry because he created this world in order for mankind to have a full life of fellowship with him. But Satan came into the world and destroyed it all, bringing death and sin with it. Jesus rises up in anger, bellowing like an angry animal. As he commands the stone to be rolled away, he reminds me of King David running to meet Goliath. David was filled with indignation that this man should defy the armies of Israel. Goliath was standing against the glory of God. Like him, Jesus comes as our champion to fight this great enemy, an enemy before whom we all quake with fear. He shouts with triumph, **"Lazarus, come out!"** As someone has said, the authority of Jesus is so great that, had he not specified Lazarus, all the tombs would have given up their dead.

To return to an illustration I used earlier, to believe in Jesus is to treasure him so much that he is the last one we would throw out of the balloon that is losing altitude. Or even better, we would choose to keep him in the balloon with us and go down together, because he is the resurrection and the life. If you have Jesus with you, even the worst case scenario of death holds no ultimate power over you.

CONCLUSION:

Jesus asked Martha a very important question that I want to ask you now. **"Do you believe this?"** (v. 26). Have you come to treasure Jesus as the resurrection and the life? Let me point out one more thing that may help you to believe this. Several times in our text Lazarus is referred to as the one Jesus loved. He raised him from the dead because he loved him. But it was this act of raising Lazarus that hardened the resolve of the political leaders to put Jesus to death. Jesus knew that the only way he could interrupt Lazarus' funeral was to arrange his own, and he did it anyway. This was no cheap effort on his part, leading to his agony on the cross. But the one who is the resurrection and the life was raised again, and now his death and resurrection have become the means by which life comes to the entire human race. May God help you to believe this as you treasure the one who is the resurrection and the life!