

Lent 5, Year A  
The Very Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD  
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
March 26, 2023  
Ezekiel 37:1-14  
Psalm 130  
Romans 8:6-11  
John 11:1-45

## **Raised Up**

“Unbind him and let him go.” Where does he go?

After that very long gospel today, you probably aren't inclined to keep reading. But if you keep reading, you'll see: Lazarus goes home. Lazarus goes the short distance from the tomb where he lay for four days back to the house he shares with his sisters, Martha and Mary.

He has been brought back to life, raised from the dead, and he goes home.

The first reading from Ezekiel gives us a parallel of this. God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to all the people who are like those whose bones are dried up and whose hope is lost that God is going to open their graves and bring them up from their graves. God is going to bring them home to Israel. Lazarus, his grave opened and him brought forth, returns to his home and his people.

The raising of Lazarus is the seventh of seven signs in John's gospel, and in this story, Jesus makes the fifth of his seven “I AM” statements: *I AM the resurrection and the life.*”

The resurrection is being raised to new life, life beyond death, life after a death. What is the life? The life is intimate, close association with Jesus and continuing in his company day by day.

Resurrection is great; life is even better. The point of resurrection is to bring more life; after death, after any death, more life.

Lazarus, raised to new life, unbound and set free, goes home. He and his sisters continue to deepen their relationships with Jesus. Later in John's gospel, Lazarus reclines at table with Jesus, as close as you can be sharing a meal with someone. Martha administers the household that she is in charge of to continue to offer hospitality to Jesus and other disciples. Mary sits at the feet of Jesus as his disciple

and later in John's gospel, though today's gospel references it, later she will anoint Jesus' feet with costly ointment and wipe them with her hair.

This life of reclining at table, offering hospitality, and anointing another is what resurrection makes possible, not only for Lazarus, Martha, and Mary but also for us.

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Before Jesus raises Lazarus, he weeps. He weeps publicly. It makes me wonder if he also wept privately sometimes, all those times when he would go away alone, often up a mountain or on the lakeshore to recharge, to refresh, to regroup, to reconnect, to rest. Did he cry sometimes when he was alone?

This time Mary and Martha are there, and a big crowd of people who know them are also there, many of whom have come out from Jerusalem the two miles to their home in Bethany to console them in the loss of their brother. In the presence of all those people, Jesus weeps openly, publicly.

He weeps for the loss of Lazarus and the reality of grief for Martha and Mary and all who love Lazarus as he does. Perhaps he also weeps for himself, knowing what is to come and probably knowing that this sign, bringing someone back to life, is probably going to be the straw that breaks the camel's back. It's probably going to be the thing that finally brings about official action against him, to get rid of him.

And it does. Raising Lazarus accelerates the plot to kill Jesus, and it brings about a plot to kill Lazarus also, kill him a second time because people cannot stop talking about this, this action by this one who brought someone back to life after four days in the tomb. The religious authorities determine they should do away with Lazarus again and with Jesus altogether.

Jesus weeps because he knows, as we know, everything that has life and breath, everything that has spirit—*nephesh* in the Hebrew—everything will die. Everything mortal, everything animal will die. Everything incarnate must die. It's part of the cycle of life. It's natural. It's the way things are. And, even so, it hurts. It's painful. When people we know and love and care about die, when animals we know and love and care about die, it hurts. Grief is real, and grief is very sneaky.

Jesus can overcome his own grief and help us to overcome ours, but he cannot take our grief away. We have grief; we know grief and sorrow, and we must walk through them. And the way we walk through them is the path of mourning.

Jesus weeps over the fullness of what death does, over what death can take away. He cannot stop death, but he can accompany us through it and beyond it into new life.

This scene of Jesus weeping, this scene of death and grief puts me in mind of a poem by Rabbi Chaim Stern (1930-2001) of Brooklyn, New York:

“Tis a Fearful Thing”

‘Tis a fearful thing  
to love what death can touch.

A fearful thing  
to love, to hope, to dream, to be –

to be,  
And oh, to lose.

A thing for fools, this,

And a holy thing,

a holy thing  
to love.

For your life has lived in me,  
your laugh once lifted me,  
your word was gift to me.

To remember this brings painful joy.

‘Tis a human thing, love,  
a holy thing, to love  
what death has touched.”

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The raising of Lazarus puts me in mind of the many other things that the scriptures mention are raised up and of things our common life in the Church raises up:

Jacob, after seeing angels going up and down a stairway to heaven, raises up a stone to mark the place and call it Beth El, house of God. “Surely God was in this place, and I did not know it.” He raises up a stone.

After their deliverance from Egypt, led by Moses, the people of Israel in the wilderness watch as Moses raises up a serpent on a pole which they are to look at for their healing.

Our Savior raised up on a cross;  
The promise that we will be raised up on the last day;  
The teaching to ask God to raise up laborers to work in God’s harvest;  
The raising up or lifting of holy hands in prayer; prayer raised up;  
The raising up of things which have been brought low;  
The raising up of all who are bowed down;  
The raising up, the provision of what is needed for the work at hand;  
The raising up of people for ordination by parishes and congregations.

Raise up; lift up; offer up.

Japanese has a similar verb: it’s pronounced *sashiagemasu* ( 差し上げます ) 。  
*I raise it up; I lift it up; I offer it up.*

As I conclude I want to speak plainly about a need to raise up more financial commitments to get us through the summer that lies ahead.

The reading from Romans says you’re not in the flesh but in the spirit. And that flesh doesn’t mean this flesh. It’s a weird Greek word that’s hard to translate; it really means *You’re not of old mindsets; you’re now of the Spirit*. We need a new mindset about what is needed to provide for the work and witness of this community year round.

We have thirty individuals and households who have made pledges to St Paul’s for 2023. And I am enormously grateful for every one.

What we have seen in the first three months of 2023, with one week yet to go in March, is that our giving so far this year is flat. Those who have made pledge commitments are fulfilling them, but our current trend does not bode well because this is the time when the most of us are here. Many of you who spend a lot of the year elsewhere make a lot of your gifts while you are here, but our giving is flat.

And when a bunch of y'all leave and some of us crazy people who stay here all year round remain, often giving dips. And we can anticipate the gap this year. If current trends continue, we will be \$45,000.00 short for the year, and as many of you know, the budget is very, very lean.

I'm not embarrassed or afraid to talk to you about money because money is value neutral. It's a resource entrusted to us like everything else, including our own life, entrusted to us by God. The scripture does not say money is the root of all evil; it says the love of money is the root of all evil.

So, I'm speaking plainly because I know you to be generous, and I know that if you know there is a need, you will respond. And I'm telling you there's a need. Come the middle of summer at current rates of giving, we will not be able to pay our insurance. What has happened? I don't have to tell anybody here that last year was a terrible year for the markets. What that has meant for us at St Paul's is that our two very generous and well-maintained restricted funds, the Memorial Foundation and the Damascus Fund which are overseen by trustees that you elect and who carry out those duties faithfully. Neither of those funds has a prudent draw that's going to be able to be as much this year as it was last year. We hope for a rebound. In the meantime, we will fall short if we do not change the direction in which we are heading.

What can you do? Raise up a pledge commitment if you haven't yet pledged. Raise up the amount of your pledge if you can. Consider following the example of Lazarus: give attention and affection and energy to the places you call home.

In the face of death, Jesus wept. In the face of life, Jesus lives again and we through him are raised up to new life.

In the words of songwriter Sara Thomsen, I'm asking you to think about these three things:

Where is your gaze?  
Where is your heart?  
What is your part?<sup>1</sup>

We have received so much. We have life and life again in the company of Jesus and one another.

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Thomsen, "Song Like a Seed"

So, I'm saying today: *Sashiagemasu*. Offer it all up. Raise it all up. Grief, joy, weariness, energy, disappointment, hope for the future, struggles, money, concerns, tears—all of it. Offer it up.

The God who raises up all who are bowed down, the Spirit who brought alive again Jesus the Christ our Savior and Redeemer deserves nothing less than all we have and all we are.