

Death Is Slummin'

a sermon by Pastor D. Thomas Ford, Jr.
 Salem Lutheran Church
 Glendale, California
 March 9, 2008

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John 11:

[1] Now a certain man was ill, Laz'arus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

[2] It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Laz'arus was ill.

[3] So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."

[4] But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it."

[5] Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Laz'arus.

[6] So when he heard that he was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

[7] Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go into Judea again."

[8] The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?"

[9] Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If any one walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world.

[10] But if any one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."

[11] Thus he spoke, and then he said to them, "Our friend Laz'arus has fallen asleep, but I go to awake him out of sleep."

[12] The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover."

[13] Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep.

[14] Then Jesus told them plainly, "Laz'arus is dead;

[15] and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

[16] Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

[17] Now when Jesus came, he found that Laz'arus had already been in the tomb four days.

[18] Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off,

[19] and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother.

[20] When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary sat in the house.

[21] Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

[22] And even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you."

- [23] Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."
- [24] Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."
- [25] Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,
- [26] and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"
- [27] She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world."
- [28] When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying quietly, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you."
- [29] And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him.
- [30] Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him.
- [31] When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there.
- [32] Then Mary, when she came where Jesus was and saw him, fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."
- [33] When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled;
- [34] and he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see."
- [35] Jesus wept.
- [36] So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"
- [37] But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"
- [38] Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb; it was a cave, and a stone lay upon it.
- [39] Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days."
- [40] Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?"
- [41] So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me.
- [42] I knew that thou hearest me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that thou didst send me."
- [43] When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Laz'arus, come out."
- [44] The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."
- [45] Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him;

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Grace be unto you, and peace, from God Our Father and Our Lord and Savior Jesus The Christ!

A few years ago, a letter was sent to a deceased person by a Department of Social Services. It read as follows: "Your social security cheques will be stopped in March because we received notice that you passed away. May God bless you. You may reapply if there is a change in your circumstances."

Today's Gospel suggests there will be a change of circumstances.

Now, as we go into this Gospel goldmine this morning, I have to share something very interesting with you, verbatim, from a sermon preached by a Dr. Robert Greer of Wellsboro, Pennsylvania¹:

[Quote] "Are you conversant in kidspeak? Kidspeak is the high school and college slang that has been sweeping the nation for some time now. I came across a kidspeak version of today's Gospel story of the raising of Lazarus. It goes like this:

"Two fly Betties, Mary and Martha, had a brother named Lazarus, a homeslice of Jesus the Messiah. Lazarus was whack - he had a bad illness - so Mary and Martha gave Jesus the 4-1-1, saying, "Lord, the one you sweat is ill."

"Jesus said to his disciples, "Let's bounce." So they went to the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, and found that Lazarus was in the tomb - death had ganked his life. "That's killed," said Jesus, "but I don't give any props to death. Mary and Martha, raise the roof! Your brother will rise again!"

"Jesus decided to step with death. He dropped some information on his heavenly Father, then cried out to Lazarus, "What's the dilly, homeslice? Come out!"

"The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to the people around him, 'Death is slummin'. Now unbind him, and let him go"²

"Death is slummin"? Does this story make any sense to you?

"If it sounded like gibberish to you, let me give you a quick lesson in the vocabulary used these days by the backpack brigade.

"'Two fly Betties' is two very attractive females named Mary and Martha. They had a brother named Lazarus, a 'homeslice' - a close friend - of Jesus the Messiah. Lazarus was "whack" - not right - so his sisters gave Jesus the "4-1-1" - some inside information - saying,

¹ <http://home.epix.net/~fpcwells/serm020317.htm>

² "To Step With Death," *Homiletics*, March-April 1999, pp. 31-35..

‘Lord, the one you love is ill.’ Jesus and his disciples went to the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, and found that Lazarus was in the tomb.

“So Jesus decided to ‘step with death’ - to fight it - to attack it with all his heart, soul and strength. And you know the rest of the story: Jesus battles death - for Lazarus, for himself and for us.³

“Using kidspeak reclaims some of the energy and emotion that is at the core of this passage of Scripture. We have heard the story so often that it has become weak and bland. We're in danger of losing touch with the fact that its characters including Jesus are young people - thirty-something. And they're mixed up together in a dramatic confrontation with illness and loss.

“The traditional English versions of the Bible are magnificent texts, but they just don't succeed in capturing the youthful energy of this passage. When Jesus says, ‘This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby’ (John 11:4), he sounds as though he is closer to retirement than he is to being in high school.

“If we take a fresh look at this text, we see that in it Jesus is doing nothing less than waging total war on death.

“In kidspeak, he ‘steps with death,’ and his victory over death's power over Lazarus gives us a hint of not only Christ's own destiny, but ours as well.” [Close quote]

Now, I know, most of us are not high school or college students. Most of us have never heard of kidspeak. Most of us are much older than we care to be. And closer, perhaps, than we care to be to the grave. Yet, very much like the younger set, we too regard death as something to be avoided as long as possible, something, in fact, totally undesirable. Death is slummin’.”

Yet, for all the Christian faith we can muster, Jesus does seem to be taking his own good time in showing up, wouldn't you agree? Every time we turn around, someone is dying (the Jewish seminary students this past week in Jerusalem – the 22 year old President of the student body at UNC – Chapel Hill – all shot down and killed this past week) or about to die or dealing emotionally and spiritually with someone's death. Or, like the late great baseball player Ted Williams, arranging to be frozen in a cryonics' lab in the hopes one day of being brought back to life.

Mary Baker Glover Patterson Eddy, to give her all the names she acquired in her serial monogamies, thought that if she believed hard enough in Christian Science she would get over the illness called death, and so had a telephone line run into her tomb, so that she might call the office of the Mother Church in Boston and have them come fetch her when she was awakened. Nobody at the phone company has yet billed Mother Church for the call, and dear Mary is there in her

³ Stephen Krupin and Daniel Healey, "Clueless on Kidspeak? Read This!" Washingtonian, September 1998, 9.

tomb, waiting like everyone else for the Judgment Call. Today's Gospel tells us that It isn't a weak shriek out of the grave that will raise someone, but a shout into it, like the one Jesus yelled into Lazarus's resting place.

Lent begins with the sobering reminder to us that we are mortal – ashes to ashes, dust to dust – we shall return. Now here five weeks later, we have a foretaste of the feast to come, as we hear, confess and celebrate in today's lessons what The Lord can do with a pile of bones and dust and what our faith for living now can be.

Patricia de Jong, a UCC Pastor in Berkeley, summarizes well what is behind the long text Gospels we have encountered these last few weeks:

“Throughout this entire month we have heard the stories of Jesus as told to us in the Gospel according to John. This particular narrative, the improbable story of the raising of Lazarus, is part of the Lenten liturgy known in Orthodox churches as one of the ‘scrutinies.’ These are the tests and examinations for the yet unbaptized who seek to study and to enter into communion through baptism on Easter Sunday. Two weeks ago, we heard the story of the living water that Jesus gave to the woman at the well to drink. Last Sunday, we heard of the blind man who went from blindness to sight. Today, we hear of a miracle of resuscitation from the dead to new life.

“Just as John would have us believe about another kind of water and a different way of seeing, so now he would have us comprehend another kind of life. In this text John dares to assert that there is a greater marvel than coming back from the dead. It is the life, resurrected life of the baptized, that you and I are asked to live now. ‘All those who believe in me, though they die, will come to life; and all who are alive and believe in me will never die.’”⁴

In my own life I have had too many encounters with death. My first traumatic encounter with death occurred when I was in the third grade and my beloved Collie Tip was run over early one morning by our Milkman, just before I was to board the school bus. I was so overcome with emotion that it was all I could do to go to school that day. The teacher let me put my head on my desk and cry all day.

Since then I have smelled the stink of death in mine and Elsie's families and in the lives of numerous persons for whom I have been Pastor. I have heard people curse God and die angry deaths. I have seen people die with a resurrection dance in their eyes. I once had to tell 7 children all together at one time that their mother was just tragically killed. On another occasion one night after midnight I had to accompany the Chief of Staff of The North Carolina Memorial Hospital into the hospital morgue to view the body of his son. The son had just been killed in a car accident in which he, the honor student football star, had been driving drunk. Just earlier in the evening his parents had watched him march across the stage to get his high school diploma.

⁴ Patricia de Jong, March 24, 1996, “Unbind Him”, <http://www.fccb.org/worship/sermons1996.php>

I sat at the grave of my first Pastor for a long, long time after he was buried in March of 1978, long after everyone else had left. I just couldn't believe it! Someone so good and kind and gentle and loving. Dead. Jesus Christ! If you had only been here ...

It's been quite a bit longer than 4 days. I wonder why he is taking so long. Don't you?

Death is slummin'! It is damnable! And by God, "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

But, dear Christian friends, the most important thing for us, as we live our Christian lives now, is not our belief in the life of the world to come. And it is not in the part of today's Gospel telling about the Lord's temporary victory over death in raising Lazarus. It is in Our Lord's declaration before He raises Lazarus:

[25] Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,
[26] and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.

Jesus does not say, "Once day I will be the resurrection and the life." He says, "I am the resurrection and the life."

Jesus does not say, "Whoever believes in me will never die." He says, "He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live"

Listen, please to a moving story Barbara Brown Taylor tells about her friend and living resurrection life in the midst of dying:

"I cannot hear this story [about Jesus' raising Lazarus] without thinking of my friend Matilda, who died a little over six years ago. She had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, better known as Lou Gehrig's disease, which means that she gradually lost control of all her muscles. Her face went first, then her vocal chords, then her legs. For the last year of her life, she communicated by writing on a slate, one of those erasable things kids play with. Sometimes she would get so excited that she would write and erase faster than anyone could read. Matilda found a lot to be excited about.

"Watercolors, for instance. When she could not talk anymore, she taught herself to paint, until her kitchen walls were papered with tulips, peonies, daffodils, hibiscus. When you went to visit Matilda, you painted. That was one of the rules. It did not matter if you had no ability, if the last time you held a paint brush was to put a coat of latex on your bathroom wall. Matilda stuck one in your hand, shoved a plastic egg container full of colors in front of you, and you painted. The best part was afterwards when she admired your work, sticking her thumb in the air and rewarding you with her loose, drooling grin.

"It was all I could do to watch her die. I wanted someone to walk into her room with a pill or a prayer that would cure her illness or at least halt its progress, but even if that had happened--

even if Jesus himself had showed up to call her from her tomb--she would have had to die all over again later, as Lazarus did. It would have been a rescue from death instead of a triumph over it, resuscitation instead of a resurrection.

“Something bigger than that was going on with Matilda. Every time she lost something she thought she could not live without, she found out she could. First there was a painful void that lasted an hour, a day, a week. Then something new moved in to fill the empty place: fresh series of paintings, a new friend, a deeper sense of the presence of God. "He is calling me," she wrote on her slate one day, ‘like a bridegroom calling his bride.’

“Her resurrection began before she died and everyone around her saw it. When she set her cup down it was empty. There was nothing wasted, nothing left over to spill or lament. She died clean as a whistle, and several of the people who sat by her bed that day say their fear of death died with her. Having watched her do it, they believe they can do it too.

“Lord, I believe, but help thou my unbelief, because I still do not want to die. I believe Jesus has power to raise the dead, only I do not want him practicing on me. I want a God who will cut my losses and cushion my failures, a God who will grant me a life free from pain. I want a God who will rescue me from death, who will delete it from the human experience and find another way to operate.

“What I, what all of us, have instead is a God who resurrects us from the dead, putting an end to it by working through it instead of around it--creating life in the midst of grief, creating love in the midst of loss, creating faith in the midst of despair--resurrecting us from our big and little deaths, showing us by his own example that the only road to Easter morning runs smack through Good Friday.

"I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus says to grieving Martha. Not ‘I will be’ but ‘I am’--right here, right now--resurrection and life for anyone willing to believe”⁵

Today is a dress rehearsal for Easter and a reminder for us all. “Though we die, yet shall we live.”⁶ “If we live, we live unto the Lord, if we die, we die unto the Lord; for whether we live, or whether we die, we are the Lord's.”⁷

Let us pray: Dear God, thank you for the 4-1-1 you give us in Jesus Christ, our heavenly homeslice. Help us as we bounce with him. Help us raise the roof, to love and comfort those who are suffering and dying. Help us claim and live eternal life now. Help us to step with you against slummin’ death. In Jesus’ Most Holy and Precious Name. Amen.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Christian Century*, March 13, 1996, “Can These Bones Live?”

⁶ John 11:25b

⁷ Romans 14:8