

## PRESENT-TENSE SALVATION

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
March 29, 2020

John 11:1-45

Our text this morning plays a central role in John's gospel, providing a bridge between the story of Jesus's public ministry in the first ten chapters and the account of what John calls "Jesus' hour"—that is, his death, resurrection and ascension—in the final ten chapters. Hear, now, John's narrative of the raising of Lazarus from John chapter 11, verses 1-45.

*<sup>1</sup>Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup>Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup>So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." <sup>4</sup>But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." <sup>5</sup>Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, <sup>6</sup>after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*

*<sup>7</sup>Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." <sup>8</sup>The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" <sup>9</sup>Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. <sup>10</sup>But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." <sup>11</sup>After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." <sup>12</sup>The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." <sup>13</sup>Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. <sup>14</sup>Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. <sup>15</sup>For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." <sup>16</sup>Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."*

*<sup>17</sup>When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. <sup>18</sup>Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, <sup>19</sup>and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. <sup>20</sup>When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. <sup>21</sup>Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup>But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." <sup>23</sup>Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." <sup>24</sup>Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." <sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" <sup>27</sup>She said to him, "Yes, Lord,*

*I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”*

*<sup>28</sup>When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” <sup>29</sup>And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. <sup>30</sup>Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup>The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. <sup>32</sup>When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”*

*<sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup>He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” <sup>35</sup>Jesus began to weep. <sup>36</sup>So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” <sup>37</sup>But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”*

*<sup>38</sup>Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. <sup>39</sup>Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” <sup>40</sup>Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” <sup>41</sup>So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup>I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” <sup>43</sup>When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” <sup>44</sup>The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”*

*<sup>45</sup>Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.*

May God add understanding to this reading from the Holy Word.

Lazarus was dead. There was no question about it. We have to be clear about that, or this account of the greatest of Jesus’ signs loses its punch. Lazarus had succumbed to the illness that threatened his life. He had been in the tomb four days. His body was rotting and had begun to stink. Oh, yes, Lazarus was dead. And the people standing around that morning in Bethany knew it, too.

His sisters certainly knew he was dead. They thought Jesus might have done something to prevent it. Jesus had healed so many others, people he did not even know. Lazarus and Martha and Mary were his friends, his close friends. He said he loved them. But he had not come, and Lazarus was dead.

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,” Mary said, kneeling at Jesus’ feet, grief-soaked and disappointed. “Lord, if only you had been here.” She knew who Jesus was as well as anyone did. She knew he had the power to heal, to make whole, to inspire, to give life. She knew his presence might have changed the situation. She trusted him. She believed in him. She loved him. And because of all of

that, Mary could not understand why Jesus had not been there to make everything OK. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Before Mary met Jesus, Martha had got to him first. And in her typically bold style, Martha laid it all out there for Jesus. Unlike the grief-soaked tones of Mary’s voice, Martha’s had a sharp, angry edge. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” In other words, “You messed up, Jesus, but you have the power to fix it. So do it.” Martha, like Mary, knew Jesus very well. She also trusted him, believed in him, loved him. And that is precisely why she was angry. Martha felt betrayed. So she walked right up to him, stood up straight, looked Jesus in the eyes and said exactly what she felt. “Lord, if only you had been here.”

The people in the crowd that morning knew that Lazarus was dead. The voices who wondered loudly why this Jesus who had opened the eyes of the blind man could not have prevented Lazarus’s death. If this Jesus was really who he said he was, then Lazarus did not need to die. Yet Lazarus did. Perhaps all of this Jesus-the-Messiah stuff was just a sham, just one more person’s attempt to get power and control. “If he is Lord,” the skeptics murmured, “then Lazarus should not be dead. Jesus is just another con man.”

Jesus’ disciples knew that Lazarus was dead. They wanted Jesus to stay away. Jesus and the disciples had just narrowly escaped being stoned to death in Jerusalem by those angry with Jesus’ claims of being the Messiah. Fearing for their lives, they had all gone across the Jordan River to safety. But then, a couple of days after Jesus heard about Lazarus, he told his disciples it was time to go back to Judea. “Are you kidding?” the disciples asked. “Rabbi, they were just now trying to stone you, and you are going there again?” The disciples were full of fear. Maybe Jesus had forgotten what it felt like to be frozen by fear, but they had not forgotten. They had not forgotten what it felt like to hear the religious leaders plotting to arrest Jesus for his ministry. They had not forgotten what it felt like to be on guard 24/7, wary of shadows, unable to breathe deeply. “Lord, if you go there, if we go there . . .” Attending to Lazarus’s death might well bring on their own.

Jesus, too, knew that Lazarus was dead. But for him, Lazarus’s death was a joyous occasion—an opportunity to reveal the glory of God and Jesus’ power as “the resurrection and the life.” When Martha questions Jesus about his delayed arrival and Jesus assures her, in turn, that her brother will rise again, Martha answers with an assertion about the resurrection at the last day. Belief in the general resurrection of the dead was widespread in first century Judaism, so Martha is affirming her belief in one of the tenets of her faith. And yet Jesus seems not quite satisfied, or perhaps more, seeks to extend Martha’s answer so that it reaches not only forward into the distant future but outward into the immediate and concrete present. “I am the resurrection,” Jesus says, “and the life.” The promise of resurrection and life is not lodged in some distant event—“on the last day”—but is available already in the person of Jesus.

So, too, the promises of God for us are not only about life eternal with God when we die or even about God’s forgiveness at the last day. Rather, the Gospel makes a tangible difference now, makes things possible now, opens up opportunities and options now, transforms relationships now. As the religious commentator David Lose has succinctly put it, the promises of God are present tense, not just future.

We are currently engaged in a time of uncomfortable waiting: waiting for test results, waiting for ventilators and personal protection gear and other hospital supplies to catch up with soaring demand, waiting for groceries to restock, waiting for financial relief, waiting to see if we can collectively “flatten the curve.” Waiting for all this to be over. Happily, we Christians can wait with hope, confident that God will provide, that all this waiting will pass, that there will be a future and God will be there in it.

But today’s passage reminds us that God is also with us now, right in the midst of our waiting. God is with us as we grieve our losses. God in Jesus knows what it is like to weep and God’s heart is always the first to break. And right now, God strengthens us with faith that one day our tears will be dried and weeping will be a memory. And God endows us with compassion with which to comfort one another.

God is with us in our anger. God hears our cries and helps us to trust that through Jesus, God knows our anger, and that God will not let injustice or illness or even death have the last word. We can even now lift our heads and stand tall and work to overcome the evil this pandemic has unleashed in the world.

God is with us in our skepticism and doubt. God in Jesus knows that the world is not yet perfect, yet God persists in working for the healing of the world through imperfect people like you and me. So that means it will be messy and sometimes messed up. We all have a part to play in God’s work even now.

God is with us in our fear for ourselves and our loved ones. Through Jesus, God has put flesh and blood on “Be not afraid.” So take a deep breath and have courage. Keep holding on to each other too—even if only virtually and at a proper social distance, for discipleship requires community. We can borrow strength right now from one another.

It’s significant, I think, that after Jesus calls Lazarus by name to come out from his tomb, and even after Lazarus does indeed hear Jesus’ voice and come out, the miracle—or, sign, as John would call it—is not over. For after commanding Lazarus to come out of the tomb, Jesus then turns and issues a command to the waiting crowd as well: “unbind him and let him go.” The community, in other words, is commanded to participate in God’s action, to bring it to its desired end and outcome, to join in completing God’s redemptive act.

Do you get that? The community of faith gathered around Lazarus is invited to participate in God’s redemptive work. Yes, the raising of Lazarus from death to new life is entirely Jesus’ work, and yet Jesus invites the community to participate; that is, to do something, something essential and meaningful and important.

I have no doubt that God is at work in this present pandemic, working to bring good out of the chaos and evil it entails. But what if God is even now calling on us to participate in God’s redemptive work? We are all aware of the incredible service and sacrifice of the frontline workers during this crisis: the medical personnel, the grocery and pharmacy workers, the delivery people, the sanitation workers and police officers, and so many others who are not able to self-isolate as they continue to perform their essential work. They have our thanks and respect. But aren’t the rest of us also called to participate? And don’t even our smallest actions make a difference?

The *Washington Post* ran an article this week about a whole slew of ways one can make a difference during these challenging days.<sup>1</sup> Donate to nonprofits—like food banks—that are struggling to meet soaring client needs. Give blood. Order takeout or purchase a gift card or merchandise from a local restaurant. Check in on your elderly neighbors and ask if you can help shop and pick up groceries on their behalf. Adopt or foster a pet. And, of course, help flatten the curve by scrupulously following the CDC guidelines.

Nothing big or earth-shattering. Nothing that's going to earn you your salvation (or anything else for that matter). Just small things, incremental ways to be more generous, more community-minded, and more pro-active, to live into the freedom that is ours through Christ.

In little ways and big, God is inviting us to make a difference in this world right here, right now. God, in other words, is beckoning us to claim Christ's resurrection power now by participating in and completing the fantastic work God is doing all over the place.

Won't you spend a few moments today looking at the week to come—both the challenges and the opportunities of the isolation we are experiencing—and think about where you might claim God's resurrection promise and power now, make a difference in someone's life now, give yourself to a worthy cause or purpose now. It doesn't have to be huge (though it might be). It doesn't have to take a long time (although it might). It doesn't have to be spectacular (though, who knows, maybe it will be). Opportunities to unbind and let go abound, but we need to look for them so that we might hear Jesus calling us by name to make a difference to those around us.

So, claim your faith as a present-tense invitation to live your promised salvation now. Why? Because Jesus is the resurrection and the life and has promised to give us, not just more life, but life in all its abundance.

Along those lines, just one more thought. While we call this scene “the raising of Lazarus,” it's striking to realize that the actual sign Jesus performs takes up just two verses of the forty-five of this story. Maybe that's because, as is typical of John's Gospel, what matters most isn't the sign, but rather Jesus' interpretation of it and our response to it. Lazarus will die again, but the community empowered to unbind and set loose will endure. Indeed, it has endured, persisting through the centuries in works of courage and mercy, right down to this virtual congregation of which you are a part this morning. God continues both to take responsibility for our redemption and simultaneously to invite us to live into and through that redemption to make a difference even here, even now, all by grace alone.

All to God's glory and honor and praise. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Kanyakrit Vongkiatkajorn and Laura Daily, “How you can help during the coronavirus outbreak,” *The Washington Post*, March 26, 2020.