

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah
Pastor John Guthrie

“The Resurrection and the Life”
John 11.1-45



I wonder if Jesus ever thought to himself, “You never can tell if they’re listening or not.”

Today is the fifth Sunday of the Season of Lent. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, also called Passion Sunday. I wanted to briefly review with you where we have been over the past five weeks, at least in terms of the gospel passages that have served as the inspiration for sermons during that time.

Five weeks ago the youth of our church offered a service of worship centered around Matthew’s account of Jesus being tempted by Satan in the desert, and it was a moving experience for all of us. On the second Sunday of Lent we encountered the passage in John’s gospel in which the Pharisee Nicodemus visits Jesus at night and comes a little closer to discovering who this itinerant carpenter from Nazareth really is. He also hears some words about being born once again from above, and the necessity for that rebirth.

On the third Sunday of Lent, two weeks ago, we read the passage in John’s gospel in which Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s ancient well. This woman is the polar opposite in many ways from Nicodemus. She too learns that this ordinary looking man from Galilee is not ordinary. This man offers water that gushes up to eternal life. She also learns some things about what constitutes true worship.

Last Sunday we read the text in which Jesus heals a blind man on the sabbath and once again runs into trouble with the Pharisees for performing work on that day. The passage is filled with references to light and darkness, and we are warned to use care when we think we see clearly; we may be deceiving ourselves. The blind man also comes to see who Jesus really is: the Son of Man so long expected by the man’s people and nation.

Today we encounter the text in which Jesus raises his dear friend Lazarus from the dead. The passage is long and is crammed with some important themes for those of us who claim to follow Christ. We will look at only a few of those this morning.

We have seen over the past few weeks that in John’s gospel Jesus performs only a very few signs or miracles, as opposed to the many more we find in the other three gospels. In fact, if you count the number of signs there are exactly seven of them, beginning with the changing of water into wine at a wedding, recorded in chapter 2. The raising of Lazarus is the last and final of those seven signs. It happens in the little village of Bethany, very familiar to Jesus and his disciples, which is only about two miles from Jerusalem.

Jesus is on his way there for the final time. This time he will be greeted by crowds waving palm branches and shouting praises to God as he enters the city. Four days later he will be arrested, and the following day nailed to a cross on which he will die.

So his final sign of raising Lazarus is a foreshadowing of his own death. Lazarus’ entombment in a cave with a stone placed in front is a foreshadowing of his own burial. And Lazarus’ resurrection anticipates his own resurrection.

This seventh sign in John’s gospel has a rather clear connection with the sixth one, which is the healing of the blind man at the Pool of Bethesda, which we studied last week. In both of these accounts, Jesus tells his disciples that the tragedy encountered first by the blind man and then by Lazarus and his family, have happened so that God may be glorified in the removal and defeat of those tragedies.

Last week we spent a few inadequate minutes discussing the ancient and difficult question of human suffering, and I made an effort to convince you

that all suffering is not for the glory of God. In fact, there is much suffering for which there is no clear explanation, and we are simply asked to trust that God is with us, even suffers with us, in those times.

Nevertheless, it is most interesting and certainly not a coincidence that Jesus heals a blind man and raises his dear friend so that God’s glory, power, and compassion may be demonstrated. God’s glory is demonstrated in the defeat and elimination of human suffering. And it still is to this day.

One of the times we pray most fervently is when we or someone near to us is suffering. And very often, when the suffering is removed we are generally good about offering thanks to God. That is, of course, entirely appropriate.

All of the seven signs of Jesus recounted in John are intended so that the witnesses and those who hear of them may believe that Jesus is the Son of God and the long awaited Christ. He says that explicitly before he raises his good friend. Another primary purpose of this resurrection is so that the witnesses, and we, will believe that he is, as presented in the prologue of John’s gospel, the Word who was with God and who IS God.

In fact, just before he calls Lazarus out of the cave, Jesus prays a very brief prayer, thanking his Father for hearing his plea for his friend, and granting him the power to raise Lazarus. He prays this way, he says, so that the people witnessing these events might believe that he has indeed been sent by his Father. Note that we are told in the last verse of our reading that many of the Jews who were there that day, and perhaps many others who heard from them, believed in Jesus after this seventh sign.

We postmodern types are always made somewhat uncomfortable by the miracles of Jesus, perhaps no more so than this particular one in which a dead man is returned to life. We know that can’t happen. Death is death, and when a person dies, that’s the end, at least for life as we know it. But we are asked to believe that this Jesus did and continues to have power even over death. We are asked to trust that this account of Lazarus raised is a true account. And to glorify God that physical death is not the final note. Note for Lazarus, not for those we love, and not for us.

Finally, note that both Martha and Mary, when they first see Jesus, speak

the same words: “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.” Both of these sisters, through previous encounters with Jesus, have some inkling of who he is, and attribute to him the power to heal. Now he shows them that he also has the power to raise individuals from the dead.

Jesus tells Martha, “I AM the resurrection and the life.” Another one of those I AM sayings in the gospel of John, reminding us that Christ is the same God whom Moses encountered on the Mountain of Sinai. Everyone, he says, who lives and believes in him will never die, not ultimately and finally. Physical death, yes. Spiritual death, never, for those who trust in him, and live in him.

Martha replies: “Yes Lord, I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” Martha’s profession of faith.

He is the resurrection and the life. It is in and through Christ that abundant and eternal life is offered, to Lazarus and to us. We will encounter this fact with its full force two weeks from today. But today we receive a glimpse of that truth. Jesus raises his good friend. He has power even over death. He is the resurrection, and he is the life.