

## Lazarus Laughed

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...

When I first started serving this ministry (and had only been ordained for a few months – back when I was a rookie) - I received a call late in the evening from a woman whose mother was at Community Medical Center (and who was in need of a final blessing before she died)... according to the woman on the other end of the phone – her mother had been struggling... and so I got dressed and was on my way...

When I arrived (and found the correct room) I was met by the family - (who were all pouring their hearts out in grief) - and then, after introducing myself – I prayed over the woman – anointed her body with oil (making the sign of the cross on her forehead) – and then whispered the words that I whisper when someone is about to meet Jesus... I said, *“It’s okay to let go... It’s okay to go home... God is with you”*...

And less than five minutes later – the woman died – right there in front of us...

Now I don’t remember much of that evening but there are two things that I will never forget...

The first thing I remember is the look the family gave me... I couldn’t make out if they thought I had something to do with her quick passing – or if they were just in shock... and because I didn’t have much experience (the whole thing was sort of freaking me out)... and I remember wanting in the worst way to say, *“I had nothing to do with it. I swear!”*... followed by, *“Well, I guess I better get going”*...

But what I also remember was the heaviness that death brought forth into that hospital room (in that moment)... and it’s hard to put into words (what that experience is like) but it it’s like a door slamming shut – or a chapter of a book coming to an end... and no one knew what to say or to do (other than cry that she was gone)... I’m sure you’ve been there as well...

And all I can tell you (is that when you stand on sacred ground with another human being who is leaving this world behind) it can be a very strange and disturbing experience – especially if you’re afraid of death...

But friends, I share that story with you because even if you’re not afraid of death it’s hard to ignore what a powerful force death really is...I mean, it’s strange to be holding hands with a person one moment and then realizing that they’re gone from

you *the next* (because it strikes so quickly)... and ever since the beginning of time – that has been one of the rules in *the game of life* – that if you die (you're out)... game over!...

But that's why I love the readings from Ezekiel and from John's Gospel... in both readings – something very important is being revealed about God... that God takes that which is dead (and the Bible tells us – that He breathes new life into it)...

And if you take the time to really get into these stories you'll see that they're very rich and deep (in some ways)...

In fact, in John's account you can also hear the pain in Mary's voice when she has her own taste of death – as she cries out, "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*"... and yet, from reading the story we know that the brother – whose name was Lazarus – did die... and when death came to visit - everyone was hurt in some way (and on that day)... in fact, it even tells us in John 11:35 – that even "Jesus wept"...

But what does Jesus also do in this story? – which is what makes this story so amazing!

- it tells us that he brings forth life (where there was death)... hope where there is darkness... faith where there is worry...

You know, I don't get into arguments with people who tell me that some of what we read in the Bible is difficult to believe (because, quite honestly, these stories are difficult to believe – especially when read without faith... it's also the reason why we're taught to study the Bible (and then reflect upon it and apply it) and not just read it)...

But for those of us who do have faith – who have our eyes opened to see the fingerprints of God in this world - (we may have met people along the way who were declared dead but were brought back to life – we may have met some who had cancer and were cured – and some who lived through horrible tragedies – too terrible for words)... but for those of us who believe in the Message of Jesus Christ we also see God bringing forth new life in other ways as well... in ordinary things, as well...

In fact, I can remember being in high school and hearing the news that my cousin tried to take his own life... he had been caught up in a storm of drugs and alcohol and tried ending his life by putting a gun into his mouth... but by the Grace of God

he was discovered by my aunt and uncle – and his life has always given me a glimpse of what God can do...

To keep a long story short – he stopped with the drugs and alcohol (the first of many miracles) – went back to school – got married (and today is the proud father of a son that he cherishes) – and turned to God through AA... and when I hear the words, “I once was lost but now am found – was blind, but now I see” - I can immediately think of him and remember how God can take that which was on life support – and bring forth new blessings and so many miracles – too many to list...

So here’s a question for you to think about – in spite of all the places in your life where you see death – and where you see brokenness and pain and letdown and setbacks... the question is – *do you believe in what God can do?... do you believe in the power of God to bring forth new life?*

Of course, I don’t know how you might answer those questions, but let me close with something that I have always found rather interesting... it’s an old play that was written by Eugene O’Neill in 1925... and in this play he’s exploring the answer to that question I just asked you – do you believe in what God can do with death (namely bring forth new life – and amaze us beyond our greatest hopes)?...

And in this play that he titled, ‘Lazarus Laughed’ he tells the story of Lazarus’ life after he was raised from the dead... and what’s funny about the story is that when Lazarus died he saw something very interesting... he sees God (and he notices that God is always laughing) always happy – always loving (but always laughing)... and when Lazarus returns to life he tells everyone who will listen that death is not to be feared (but welcomed) the way one looks forward to a celebration... and all throughout the play Lazarus laughs as he tells his story...

And as the play develops there’s a series of people who come into Lazarus’ life to test whether he’s crazy or telling the truth... and if you know anything about Ancient Rome you know that one of the ways they extracted the truth from people (and intimidated them) was through death... and at one point in the play Lazarus is told to either denounce this crazy idea (that death is a celebration and that God is so happy with everyone) or lose his loved ones...(he refuses – they’re killed – and he keeps on laughing)...

And even when they threaten his life – he just keeps on laughing... hence the title, ‘Lazarus Laughed’...

But the take away from that story for me is that when death loses it's power over us – and when our eyes are able to see the Spirit of God at work in this world (and we rest our hope for even more in the World to Come) – not only we lose our fear of death (but we also find the gift of living in freedom right now)...

Perhaps this is why Jesus tells us in John 14:1, "*Do not let your hearts be troubled – believe in God, believe also in me*"...

Friends, you may have experienced the loss of a loved one (and maybe All Saints Sunday has special meaning for you) – or maybe it was the loss of a job or a business... death may have even come to you in the form of a broken relationship or a shattered dream – but what I'm trying to say to you this morning is to remember to bring God along for the journey (because we worship a god who takes that which has died – and breathes new life into it) – even today...

And I can promise you – that if you open your eyes and believe – you'll see what God can do... even when there's death...

May the peace of the Lord be with you in a new way... may His love and His mercy follow you wherever you may go... and may God - the Source of All Life – fill you with His hope – now and forever...

In Jesus' name we pray...

**Amen!**