

Living Faith

LUTHERAN CHURCH

God's Vision Our Mission

The Lesson of Lazarus: Jesus Has Conquered Death & Good Will Prevail

Sermon for **March 25, 2012** — The Fifth Sunday Of Lent

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*Our world is a broken system. It often seems like the bad guys have won. Nevertheless...
God is in charge — loving us and working through us to create a better future.*

Scriptural Reference: John 12:20-33

Do you ever find yourself wishing that real life was more like the old westerns we used to watch around the television set or in the movie theaters? Some of my best memories are of watching *Bonanza* or *Gunsmoke*. (Some of you are probably too young to have ever seen those, but they were good. I think they're on some of the oldies stations now.)

No matter what the drama or what was the mischief going on, the Cartwrights or Marshall Dillon — along with Festus and Miss Kitty — they always made it right. The bad guys, usually wearing black hats, never won in the end. Goodness and justice, led by men in white hats, always won in the end. And the defeat of evil and the triumph of justice always happened in an hour, even with commercials.

That's not what we see in the real world, is it? We see people starving. We see violence, in our own country and around the world. We see people dying of preventable diseases, such as malaria — which we're focusing on — AIDS or even dysentery kills thousands and thousands of people. We could look around and say, "Who is in charge of this world?" And many people — many who will never even set foot in a church, because they don't think we care about the world — are also asking the question: "Who is in charge of the world?"

Now even though we do not celebrate Palm Sunday until next Sunday, our gospel this morning comes from after Palm Sunday. It actually takes place after that triumphant entry into Jerusalem. I'd like to look back even farther, though, to a story we aren't always told in full detail.

Now in the Gospel of John, just before the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, Jesus is



welcomed into the home of Martha and Mary and Lazarus. Now what do we know happened there at that house? Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, right? That brought a lot of excitement to the community, as you can imagine. People who had not paid a lot of attention to Jesus before were suddenly very interested in this man who could raise the dead — as well we would be also today, I think. The crowds began to gather in huge numbers to hear what Jesus had to say.

The chief priests and the Pharisees began to plot on how to kill Jesus. He was gaining too much power. It is one thing to be a wandering rabbi sharing your ideas about God, doing a healing or two, feeding a few thousand people. But to be raising people from the dead — that was dangerous. His popularity could cost them their power. And in the Book of John, the raising of Lazarus is shown as the real reason why Jesus was ultimately crucified.

We hear that famous line from Caiaphas in the Book of John: “It is better to have one man die for the people than to have an entire nation destroyed.” And from that day on, the high priests and the Pharisees planned to put Jesus to death, believing it was essential for the nation to continue ... even if someone had to die unfairly. Then, as more and more people came to see Jesus and learned what he had done for Lazarus, we’re told they also came to see Lazarus. They wanted to see this man that had been raised from the dead.

And this time, we find out in Chapter 11, they also developed a plot to kill *Lazarus*. Now, I’ve read the whole Bible and I’ve been to seminary, but that never stuck with me before. They not only planned to kill Jesus, they wanted to kill Lazarus, because that way it could be: “Lazarus was just resuscitated, he wasn’t really raised from the dead. Jesus didn’t really do this miracle.”

I find it interesting, in an ironic kind of way, that while they’re making this plan to kill Jesus — which began because of raising Lazarus — they really never stopped to wonder: “If He could defeat death by raising Lazarus, maybe He can defeat death himself. I guess they just didn’t carry it out in their thinking to that degree.

Today’s text, though, starts with the Greeks who want to see Jesus. They ask Philip, who goes and tells Andrew, and then together they go and they see Jesus. But Jesus is beyond talking to the crowds. He is beyond a “meet and greet,” as politicians often have. He is in Jerusalem now, and He is getting down to business. We are left hanging. We are not told that the Greeks ever meet Jesus, and we wonder why do they want to see him. Perhaps it was just because of his reputation regarding Lazarus.

But here we are: Jesus is giving His last public discourse and dialogue in John, telling the disciples what is going to happen and what it means. Jesus tells them that His soul is troubled. He is not looking forward to the cross, yet He knows that is the reason He has come to earth incarnated as a human. He has come to glorify the name of God.

Then we have a voice from heaven — sounds like thunder or sounds like an angel — saying

that the Father's name has been glorified and will be glorified. At that moment, when God speaks, as it is so often, God unites the past, the present and the future, because God does have control over time.

Could Lazarus be not just the incident that raises fear in the minds of the priests and Pharisees — fear that raises violence — but also a preview of what God has planned through Jesus: the complete conquering of death?

Finally at the end of today's Gospel, we get a pronouncement by Jesus that can be confusing — and quite frankly, about half of what John writes is confusing; he is the most complicated and most obscure of all the four Gospel writers — but we hear Jesus say that the ruler of this world will be driven out.

As John so often does, he talks in cosmic terms. Not the ruler of the kingdom of Israel, not the ruler from Rome, but the ruler of the cosmos — not just our planet, the whole *cosmos* — will be driven out.

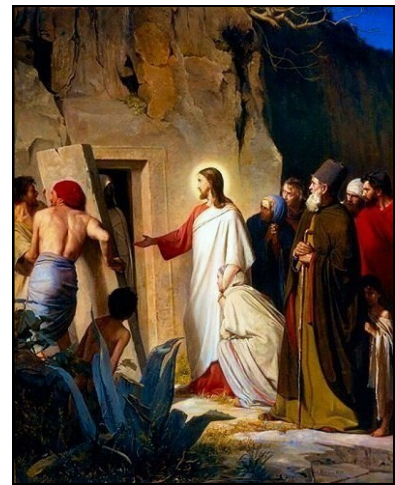
In a commentary I read this week, Charles Campbell states that we should think about translating the "world" into a different word. He suggests translating it into the word "the system," capital "S." The System will be driven out.

So what is the system we see around us? What was the norm in the time of Jesus, and what is the norm as we look around at our world? Greed, of course, plays a big part in how our system works. Violence as an acceptable response to problems, or as a response to fear. Discrimination against people who do not look or talk like we do. The system is in charge — definitely — of winners and losers, the rich and the poor.

I was reminded this week, during our Wednesday night study, of a statement made by Saint Augustine: "God gave us people to love and things to use." And then, unfortunately, we humans tend to get it backwards, and we like to use people and love things. That's what the system tells us to do. That is what is important. And it was the same in the day of Jesus.

But Jesus is resolute and uncompromising that the system that seems to be in control will be ending and the reign of God is coming in. In terms of those old Westerns, Jesus is saying that the people in the white hats will have the last word, and the people in the black hats will be defeated. That certainly is good news that can give us a lot of hope: We will someday live in a world as God intended to be. Greed and domination and enslavement and violence will be a thing of the past. That's really wonderful good news, right?

But we look around ... I can hear you... I can hear your minds going. (If we had some



Raising Lazarus

Carl Heinrich Bloch

1875

oil on copper plate

newspapers here to hold up, that would be great.) That's not what we see in our world — that good has overcome evil. It seems to me as if the evil that controlled the world back in the day in Jerusalem is taking a very long time to die and to be cast out. I still see greed and oppression and discrimination. I still see people hypnotized by the thought that more things are better. People who use people and love things.

But as I've told you many times, my favorite spiritual word is ... "*nevertheless.*"

It looks as if evil is winning; but we are promised that God has already defeated evil. We don't always see it reflected in the world around us. *Nevertheless*, we choose to believe in the words of God: that the ruler of this world has been defeated, and that we are given hope. We choose to trust in that hope, *nevertheless*. That is a word of faith. No matter how it looks around us, *nevertheless*, we believe God is in charge, and that all people will be drawn to God.

And sometimes, if we look really hard ... sometimes in the midst of when the world seems to be controlled by that system of out-of-sync priorities, that system that doesn't include love and compassion ... in the midst of that, if we look hard, sometimes we just can see the good coming through, and we can believe that what Jesus said is true.

Like when we see 35,000 ELCA teen-agers planning to go to New Orleans this summer again to work on restoring the city. Or when we see churches that try to address the problems of their neighborhood and their community, something we always are always trying to do here; to be engaged with the problems of hunger, or to be involved with the problem of people who don't speak English or people who can't afford healthcare.

I also see that glimmer when we see people whose hearts are truly heavy when they think about a child dying every 45 seconds of malaria. I don't know how long I've been up here preaching — somebody's probably timing me — but every 45 seconds a child is dying of malaria? And every day, 30,000 people are dying because of dirty water? But there are people out there working on these causes and many, many, many more.

So I guess what I'm saying today with this difficult text is ... this is a hard one, because Jesus says the ruler of this world has been kicked out, is gone ... and it's hard to see that sometimes, especially if you read the newspaper or listen to the news ... *nevertheless*, God really is in charge. God's kingdom is coming and is here.

And so, when things look dark — and I know for so many of you, you're going through hard times right now, really painful things — try to hold on to the word "*nevertheless.*"

Nevertheless, Jesus loves us, God loves us. *Nevertheless*, we are in God's care.

And may we be the people — the followers of Jesus who are like the old westerners with the white hats on — may we work for a world that hungers so much for love and compassion.

Amen.