

## **“The Light and the Dark”**

A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver  
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon  
29 March 2020

### **John 9:1-41**

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.

In 2008 Drew Gilpin Faust, the former president of Harvard and an esteemed professor of U.S. history, wrote a book entitled *The Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, a study of how the conflict changed attitudes towards and ways of dealing with death. It was a fascinating work, looking at one of the less considered, but still profound, outcomes of the war.

The Civil War was unlike any other conflict in our nation's history. It was defined by what separated people: North and South, slave and free, black and white. Still, a people divided, with radically different conceptions of the good, propelled forward by mutually exclusive aims, shared one thing in common: young men died by the scores of thousands in formerly unimaginable brief periods of time, the result of industrialized killing.

This war had far more in common with the First World War than it did with the Revolution. The industrial revolution produced technology that enabled carnage to be wrought on a once unimaginable scale. The dead came home – if they did – in numbers never before seen. Many did not, and the result was the creation of cemeteries dedicated to the fallen dead. Often times there was nothing left behind for the bereaved to mourn over. The understanding of death, its prevalence in people's lives changed people's thinking, and the nature and location of grieving, all led to changes in how the dead were mourned.

Today, we are seeing something similar as attitudes change though admittedly, the conditions shaping the dynamic are different from those of 150 years ago. This time, war does not stalk us; instead, a silent virus besieges us.

The coronavirus that plagues cities around the world plays no favorites, makes no distinctions between the rich or poor, the anonymous or the famous. Indeed, it makes no distinctions between nations or races. As I write this, the coronavirus has manifested itself in more than 150 countries and health care professionals and civil authorities are struggling to deal with the ever-greater numbers of the ill. With precautions being put in place to limit the spread of infection, people are in the hospital, without family or friends, and some of the sick are dying, alone. Funerals are being conducted in novel ways, with families often left bereft of comforting rituals and simple means of reassurance, like a hug or the presence of trusted relations.

In times of stress and crisis it is ever more important that we look for the light. We cannot let the dark overwhelm us; yet we cannot deny its existence, either. It is part of life, part of the path we all travel. This is brought home for us by John 11, the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

I won't dwell at length on the events of this passage, which are familiar to anyone with a passing knowledge of the Gospels. Rather, I will call attention to some of the details.

First, this story appears only in the Gospel of John. While Jesus brings back the son of the widow from Nain in Luke (7:11-17) and raises Jairus' daughter in all three of the Synoptics (Mark 5:21-43, Matthew 9:18-26, and Luke 8:40-56), Lazarus does not appear in those books. Clearly, John has something he wants to say.

Second, we should note that John has the highest, most developed Christology of the four evangelists. So, it isn't surprising that Jesus, wholly human, yes, but also wholly divine, is able to resurrect a dead man.

Third, details matter in this story. We need to know that Lazarus had been dead four days, for in ancient Judaism there was a widely held belief that the soul lingered for three days – thus, Lazarus was well and truly dead, not comatose, not lingering, but *dead*.

Fourth, the varying reactions of the players in this story are notable. We have the Disciples, eager to serve, yet not comprehending what Jesus means or intends; the sisters, devout and faithful, yet still wondering what might have been, had Jesus come earlier; and then we have the townsfolk, with all their differing responses, some essentially thinking that Lazarus had been alive all the time, others prepared to join with Martha and Mary in confessing Jesus as the Messiah.

In the distant past, and in the present day, the response to Jesus has varied wildly. The difference between ‘then’ and ‘now’ is that in Lazarus’ day people saw Jesus raise his friend from the dead – and still refused to believe in him. Clearly, there are those who prefer to live in the dark, rather than come out into the light. Before we condemn others, we need to ask where we fall on this spectrum. I believe that we all would prefer to be like Jesus, that we would all like to be children of light. But the truth is, sometimes, we gravitate towards the dark, because of a deep, unmet need or out of a sense of misguided comfort or because the world and its temptations get the better of us.

And let us not forget Jesus. We know he was without sin, but as a human, there was no avoiding the darkness that inevitably tinges of our lives; he was affected by it as are we. So, we see Jesus confronting the death of a dear friend. He knows that with God he will be able to bring Lazarus back to the land of the living, but in the moment, he still confronts his friend’s passing, acknowledges the grief of Martha and Mary, knows the pain and feels the loss they endure. It is the contrast with the dark that gives the light so much power, it is the seeming finality of death that endows resurrection with such meaning.

Fifth, this story is *not* about Lazarus. *It’s about Jesus.* This is something we should already know but it needs to be stated over and over again. This is not to say that Lazarus is not important, far from it. We know that Jesus loved him, along with the man’s sisters Martha and Mary. Lazarus was part of what may well have been Jesus’ second ‘family’, people he could trust and count on when he came to Jerusalem (Bethany, the place where Lazarus lived, died, and lived again, was a village just outside the city, and in John’s Gospel, one he visits multiple times) and based on the reaction of the townspeople to Lazarus’ death, it would appear that he was a significant figure in the community. But given what we don’t know, specifically the lack of anything about what happened to Lazarus in the wake of his miraculous resurrection and how he dealt with this event, we can see that the story of this man raised from the dead was of interest to the author only insofar as it served to tell the story of Jesus, the Christ. This incident clearly foreshadows the coming death and resurrection of Jesus, which will demonstrate conclusively God’s victory over death.

So why the preview? Why does Jesus bring Lazarus back from the dead? As one of the people in the crowd asked, if Jesus gave a blind man sight, why didn’t he just heal Lazarus when he was ill and still alive? Why did Lazarus have to die?

To simply say this was done for the ‘Glory of God’ does not do the incident, nor frankly, God, justice. Clearly, Jesus needed to wait for the passing of Lazarus before he performed his miracle, what John would call a ‘sign’. Now, as I’ve argued before, God doesn’t simply use us as tools or props. Our faith tells us that God is not without feeling and

the Gospel relates to us that Lazarus meant the world to Jesus. The tears that Jesus wept weren't those of a stoic, suffering quietly. Mourning, showing grief, in Jesus' day was demonstrative and we have no reason to believe that when the text says he cried, it means he *cried*. That said, while God does not cause calamity or illness to befall his creatures just to make a point, there is no reason to believe he will not take a tragic or malign situation and then use it to show his purposes. This might seem callous, but it's not. Who wouldn't want to use a fire to communicate lessons about safety? Who wouldn't want to share what they had learned about dealing with an outbreak of disease? Fire and illness and similar events are part of the darkness in our lives; by learning from them, we are able to let the light shine and not let the dark prevail.

I cannot help but think this was an exceedingly difficult sign for Jesus to perform because it involved someone to whom he was close. Do not misunderstand me – being Jesus, he cares about, loves, everyone – the Samaritan woman at the well, the blind man whose sight he restored, Jairus and his daughter, the widow who lived in Nain and her son. But the death and resurrection of Lazarus was different, it was something personal. Lazarus was not just a man, a beloved child of God. He was Jesus' *friend*. Jesus, being fully human, must have felt powerful emotions during this episode. Then add those to his foreknowledge of this own future and we can imagine how hard all of this must have been for him.

We have to wonder if at some level Jesus felt pain in restoring Lazarus to life. We do not know what the afterlife might look like. But for a short time, Lazarus did. Imagine if he basked in God's glory, only to be returned to earth. The experience would have been jarring. And while he surely must have been pleased to be reunited with his sisters and neighbors, the ache he would have felt from being wrenched from the immediate presence of God must have been acute. Without darkness, there is no light.

Without darkness, there is no light. A simple phrase, but I hope not one without meaning. During this time of widespread unease and in some places fear, where states have issued stay-in-place orders, where people are separated from their loved ones, our emotions may be roiled. At the very least, we know this is a strange, new world that we inhabit and while this crisis will pass, we cannot know the future. Perhaps it is better that we are not blessed with that knowledge. Our options are preserved, our creativity is not hindered.

Again, consider Lazarus. Jesus will visit the sisters again, later in John's Gospel. But we will hear nothing of Lazarus. He does not speak. Perhaps he saw the future and was simply overwhelmed by the experience, knowing that he would be with God again when he died a second time, wanting nothing more than to be reunited with his Maker. We simply do not know.

This season of Lent is the most somber and holy of times, a time for us to meditate upon our sins, our failings, the way we so often try to stand up but fall down again. We hide in our shame, shunning connection when that is what we need most. But this is also a time of second chances, a time to seek forgiveness from God and our fellow men and women. Especially during this time, when we live without confidence about our futures, wondering if we or someone we know will be among those who are felled by the coronavirus, when jobs may no longer be secure, this is the moment to not only seek forgiveness but to be extra forgiving, to spare people the stress of living with their spiritual failures, for we know that we each have them, though they may differ in scope and scale. And to borrow a phrase from Scripture, judge not, lest you be judged.

Let us remember that just as light requires the dark, so does the dark require the light. Jesus did, in fact, give Lazarus a second chance at living. We do not know why Lazarus has no more to say in the Gospel but it may be as simple as the evangelist having turned his attention to other themes and illustrations as he tells the story of Jesus. The Resurrection of Christ had been prefigured in Lazarus. There was no more to tell of his story because, as was noted earlier, this is Jesus' story. It would not be inappropriate to think that Jesus had blessed Lazarus with a great gift. He would once again be with his sisters and in his community. He would work, play, laugh, and, yes, cry. He knew he would die – and unlike you and me, he knew what was in store: assurance, comfort, and God's love.

This is knowledge we may carry forward in the days to come. God is with us, just as he was with those who mourned and worried and lived during the Civil War. God is with us now, as we confront this illness. And God will be with us, as we go into the future that he has made.