

Pastor Jon's Sermon from Sunday, March 26, 2023

Text: John 11:1-45, "The Raising of Lazarus".

"Friendship, Faith Questions, and the Faith Community"

The raising of Lazarus reminds me of a Christian movie that came out in 2002 called Joshua. It is about a mysterious man named Joshua who appears in a small town named Auburn and begins changing the lives of everyone he meets, simply by being around them.

Joshua takes up residence in a barn that he rents to use as his home and woodcarving shop. To the surprise of a local priest, the roof does not leak after Joshua moves in, despite the many holes in it.

The more time Joshua spends in town, the more attention he draws to himself simply by doing what he does. He begins by rebuilding the Baptist Church which was destroyed during a storm the year before.

Later, the local Catholic church hires him to carve a statue of the Apostle Peter, to which Joshua responds that it should be made of ash and that he "knows Peter".

Joshua spends his next few weeks helping out anyone he meets. At a tent revival he calls out a con artist preacher and restores the sight to a blind woman sitting in the audience.

The Catholic church is suspicious of Joshua until he resurrects a man (Theo) from the dead. He is invited to Rome to explain. Sounds like our Raising of the Lazarus story, right?

Our Gospel for today of the Raising of Lazarus in John 11 has so many ways for us to connect to it. It could be a three week preaching series.

But today, I have broken it down into 3 parts with title, "Friendship, Faith Questions, and the Faithful Community."

The first section I will call **Friendship**.

Lazarus, a close friend of Jesus is ill. We don't know what his illness was, but we know it was serious... leading to death. Not knowing what the illness is helps us to relate to times when a friend or loved one of ours is ill. Lazarus had two sisters, Mary and Martha.

Remember that Jesus visited Mary and Martha at their house in Luke 10:38. Martha served and Mary sat at the feet of Jesus listening to him teach. John tells us that Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. And believing that Jesus could do something for their brother, the sisters sent for Jesus. Jesus said to his disciples, “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.”

Jesus delays in going for two days, which doesn’t seem very responsive to the request. But Jesus sees this opportunity as his greatest sign so far... raising the dead. A sign is something that points to something else. The raising of Lazarus will foreshadow Jesus’ own resurrection, and the resurrection life promised to us.

The next section I will call **Faith Questions**. We all have them. Jesus arrives in Bethany after Lazarus has been in the tomb 4 days. It was believed in Jewish culture that someone was truly dead after 3 days. And Jesus plainly says, “Lazarus is dead.” Martha heard Jesus was coming and went out to meet him. She confronts him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Can you relate to Martha’s questioning of Jesus? Was she angry at Jesus? Was she accusing Jesus of letting her brother die? She is clearly troubled that Jesus did not prevent a loved one’s death. We can relate to the “What if” question of Martha. We can’t resist revisiting the past that led up to our loss. We replay that day in our minds over and over again. What if I did this or that? We wonder, what if we tried harder or tried that experimental treatment?

But even in the midst of Martha’s questioning, she has a thread of hope. “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” And she was right. Jesus promised that her brother would rise again.

But Martha is thinking resurrection in the future, like most faithful Jewish people... the resurrection on the last day. But Jesus says resurrection life can happen now. He says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

By saying “I am” he is saying he is God like Moses at the burning bush when God says, “I am who I am.” And Resurrection can happen now through a relationship with Jesus. Resurrection life in John’s Gospel can be experienced both now in the nitty gritty of life and after we die.

This is actually a theme in John’s gospel. Believing in Jesus, just knowing him, promises us abundant new life now. It promises light in the midst of darkness, life in the midst of death. What does this resurrected life look like for you? Where do you see signs of resurrection now?

Finally, I will call the last section the **faithful community**. Martha and Mary had people gathering around them to console them at the loss of their brother. They were in the house comforting both Martha and Mary. I am sure they were sharing food together. Jesus arrived at the house and had a parallel encounter with Mary. “Lord if you had been here...” Jesus saw all these people weeping with Mary. John says that Jesus was disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. Then Jesus began to weep. Our God in human flesh weeps with us when we are hurting. If we think God doesn’t care about our losses and grief, this text tells us otherwise. We have a God who grieves with us.

Jesus then went to the tomb and asked the faithful community to roll the stone away. Jesus said a prayer and cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” And Lazarus came out like a mummy and Jesus said to the faithful community, “Unbind him and let him go.”

We are this faithful community. When one of our people is hurting, we are called to be with them, to weep with them, share food with them. We are also called to be a community that rolls away stones, removes barriers to entry into the faith or church. We are called to unbind people and welcome them into community.

Yes, this text promises resurrection to us after we die. But it also promises a hope filled life now, in the midst of all that is happening in our world, all the pain. We don’t have to wait till the last day, to live in God’s abundant love and grace. Jesus says, I am the resurrection and life now. We experience this new life in hearing the Word of God

and receiving the sacraments. Like the movie Joshua, which is another form of Jesus, his presence changes everything.