

**Alive in Christ |John 11:1-45; Romans 8:6-11 | LUMC | March 26, 2023.**

Dear Church family and friends: we have been on a Christ-missional journey that began with an elite man being called to salvation, a woman of questionable character being called to ministry and given a dignified new character among her people, a man born blind receiving sight for the first time (and confessing greatly and affirming without reservation, he received a gift no other would offer except the Son of God).

Jesus once again surprises us by doing the impossible in the mind of humanity—raising a dead person to life. What a spiritual journey we have had! Along the way we had our lessons that we can briefly sum up as: what is impossible in our eyes and our conscience is possible with God. What we never perceive happening, can happen if God wants it to happen. We may block it with all our knowledge and wisdom, yet God can make it happen because God is not a human being. God doesn't change his plan or mislead with a wrong strategy. Let us be in wonder of the glorious works of God through the life of Lazarus of Bethany, brother to Martha and Mary.

The story of Lazarus reminds me of an African children's story written by Gcina Mblope in her book, *Stories of Africa* (pages 19-23). Gcina describes a lion caught in a trap. A man found it. The lion cries for help, the man asks, "If I help you, will you eat me?" The lion replied, "Of course not! How can I kill someone who saves my life? Please—I am dying!"

The man fears what might happen once the lion is freed! He again asks the lion to promise not to kill him. "Alright, all right, I promise," said the lion. The lion even offers to be a friend and teach the man how to hunt like the lion. The lion further promises to go everywhere together as friends.

However, after a while the lion decides to eat the man! Another person comes across to find them arguing, the man is asking the lion why he wants to break the promise. The "arbitrator" listens and decides neither the lion nor the man is right. He does not believe a lion can be trapped or a man could have saved the lion. He asks both the lion and his "savior" to go and demonstrate at the trap. They agreed and went to the trap. And again, the lion was trapped. The arbitrator asks the man who saved the lion to run away. They both left the lion in the trap!

The lion and man's tale is a human-created story with moral lessons: a warning to never break promises. In so doing you can embarrass yourself, lose trust, credibility, and dignity with other beings. Once one makes a promise one ought to stay their course despite the consequences. When Jesus decides to raise Lazarus, some of disciples feared to go near enemy who purposed to kill Jesus. Despite the opposition, Jesus kept the promise and raised Lazarus.

Lazarus' story is different from the lion story we just heard. Lazarus' narrative is based on true characters: Jesus, Lazarus, Mary, Martha, the pharisees, and the disciples. Lazarus was brother to Mary and Martha. They lived at Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem about 2 miles down the southeast slopes of the Mount of Olives on the west bank today. Today Bethany (Al Eizariya) is a Palestinian enclave. It spreads toward

Bethlehem, on the carriage road to Jericho. It is at Bethany where Jesus was fully accepted and it is at Bethany where Jesus received his last anointing before his death on the cross. So there is something very unique in the story of Jesus and Lazarus, resident of Bethany.

After Jesus' death, the Pharisees wanted to kill anyone associated with the miraculous work of Jesus, and they began searching for Lazarus. Lazarus migrated from Judea to Cyprus to escape death. Later he became the bishop of the Kition, the present day Larnaka in Cyprus.

The raising of Lazarus to life is perhaps the last miracle Jesus did before his death on the cross. The Lazarus narrative informs us of the glorious work of God that challenges us to move away from our mindset on impossibilities, a story scientists or even science-minded people might associate with ancient myths. The narrative unfolds to jab our thoughts and provoke our inherent stubborn mindset to open to the possibilities of God doing a new thing!

Yes, we know that during death the heart stops. In a matter of days the body starts decomposing. There is no reversal whatsoever. That is based on natural facts and on science. However, when Jesus appears, he contradicts our earthly beliefs and reorients our finite thoughts to being people of faith. The narratives we encountered these few weeks are to remind us to rely on God despite our limited ability to understand everything in our lives or the lives of others.

Every year when we read these stories, God brings new insights to our faith and makes us continue believing and submitting our lives to God. We are called to follow Christ in a new way, to remain focused on Christ who can provide light to see what we have never seen in our lives or in the lives of others. Christ, who wakes us up to the reality of death and the possibility of resurrection, wants us to believe in both physical and spiritual resurrection.

When facing death, we want to face it with Christ and die in Christ who can resurrect us physically and spiritually. We have a part to play and that is to fully trust God with our lives. The prerogative of living or dying should be left to God. Martha should inform us to trust God and leave all doubts. She did not think a person in the grave four days could resurrect nor become whole again. She argued with Jesus and wanted to spare Jesus the smell of Lazarus' body. When Jesus said, "Lazarus is asleep—dead but can return to life," she objected. Whether she was in denial or in delirium for losing her brother, the only person who offered them security in a men-dominated society, we can only imagine!

Nevertheless, Jesus reminded Martha, He "is the resurrection and the life and those who believe in Him though they may physically die; they will live, and those alive who believe in Jesus shall never die." Martha awakened her spiritual faith, she repented and proceeded to bring her sister Mary to witness their brother coming back to life. Faith can be blocked by our fear of anything that worries us, but Jesus comes in handy to those who are ready to be awakened to the reality of their faith and need to keep the light of the spirit alive in midst of any temptation.

When Jesus met Mary, her anguish touched Jesus. He began to weep with her in the presence of the Pharisees who had come to console the two women. Jesus weeps with us and Jesus feels our pain and knows those who mock us. Despite what we face from any source, let us take it to Jesus. Jesus can face enemies on our behalf.

Jesus is ever present in time of danger. Let us never feel alone! Jesus raised Lazarus in the midst of his enemies baying for his soul after he gave a blind man sight. The very same were at this home and some believed in Jesus because of this miracle.

Our faith in Jesus can sustain us when the world around us is crumbling. Hang on to your faith in Jesus. In Christ we are more than conquerors; let us have faith beyond the grave. Our faith will save us in time of trouble.

Jesus is with us. He will see us through. Jesus did this miracle for us so we can believe and call upon Him to be in peace. We know temptation is around us all the time, and Jesus calls to remain vigilant by reading the Word of God. He calls us to be watchful for every way that temptation may rear up, and to be prayerful not to be tempted.

We can focus on many lessons from these narratives to help us check if we are “elites” who are too much into their heads possessed with the pride of a ‘holier than thou’ attitude! And, if we are willing for Christ to change us and bring us down to where other human beings live—a life of simplicity and joy and gratitude of being who we are. Let us always ask Jesus to help us stay in our faith, and for others to see our faith in God. I pray that our private lives are like the life we wear in public, never being in sheep’s clothing but inside being something else! What we say is what it is and there is nothing less.

May we also be concerned that others not see us like the blind being among them. May we ask God every time to help us see the plight of other human beings and not focus on our needs only. May Christ’s narrative influence us to remain in the spirit more than our human narrative—lion story that encourages us to remain in the flesh affecting our faith in Christ.

Amen