

# For Our Sake

By

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## **John 11:38-45**

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 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." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. 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." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 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."

Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did believed in him.

During this season of Lent, we have been anticipating the moment described in today's second reading--the raising of Lazarus. All of the preceding verses in John's eleventh chapter lead to that dramatic event and we have moved slowly through the narrative, pondering how Jesus got word that his friend was critically ill, but delayed leaving for two more days; of how when he arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had already died and his body had been in the tomb four days; of how Martha rushed up to Jesus and cried out "If you had been here my brother would not have died;" of how Jesus told her that he was the resurrection and the life; of how the other sister Mary came to him and expressed the same lament. Jesus asked where they had placed the body, and upon hearing the news, he began to weep.

All of those events have been part of our reflection, and now we come to the decisive moment as Jesus walks up to the cave that is Lazarus' tomb and calls for the stone covering its entrance to be rolled back. Martha tries to stop him. "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days," and he replies, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" The stone is removed, and while standing outside, Jesus shouts, "Lazarus, come out!" John tells us that the deceased soon emerges from the tomb wrapped with bands of cloths around his face, his hands, and his feet. Then Jesus says to the people, "Unbind him and let him go."

And what comes next? Do we read about shouts of praise by all who witnessed it? Does John tell of Jesus hugging the sisters and Lazarus as the crowd rushes in to celebrate? Is there a description of how those four friends gathered for dinner that night, talking breathlessly about all that had happened, thanking Jesus repeatedly for the outcome? No, we do not. Certainly, such events could have taken place, but John doesn't record them. Instead, he says, "Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him."

What a literary letdown. We have been building to this event since late February, and all John gives us is some dispassionate third-person statement about the impact of that miracle on everyone except its beneficiary and his sisters. It would be roughly the equivalent of watching a motion picture about some person who has overcome tremendous odds and is near the moment of achieving her dream. The music crescendos to the instant when she is about to cross the finish line or open the envelope, solving the mystery, or her adversary is defeated, only to have the screen go blank, music stop, and a message appear: “She did it and lived happily ever after.”

Our Scripture reading is just as abrupt for over forty-two verses, John has described the anguish and delay, lament and grief leading up to and following Lazarus’ death, yet when Jesus acts, the writer, in a mere three lines, tells of a resurrection and that many believed. Given his brevity, we might feel the author could have benefited from a good editor, someone who might have taken a red pen to the manuscript and, in the margins, written: “Needs more.”

That was my initial reaction, yet as I continued to ponder John’s choice, I came to feel the gospel writer gave us a gift by narrating the aftermath as he did. As perhaps the main point of the chapter is summed up in what Jesus said just before the crowd experienced Lazarus’ return.

It occurs after the stone has been removed and before calling for Lazarus to emerge. In between is a prayer or declaration by Jesus as he says aloud, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. 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.”

In some ways, that act is surprising. Years earlier, Jesus told another crowd, “Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they

may be seen by others...but whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.” (Mt. 6:5-6). That’s what he told his followers to do, yet before the miracle, Jesus did just the opposite; an act on his part that recalled for me a vastly different moment from 70 years ago at the White House.

Bill Moyers was best known as a journalist and commentator, yet for 19 months in the mid-60s, he served as Press Secretary for President Lyndon Johnson. There is a story told from that time when Moyers was offering a prayer. It wasn’t during a press conference or other public event, but rather at some private occasion or meal, the details of which I have forgotten. As he began to pray, the President interrupted him and said, “Speak up, Bill, I can’t hear you,” and reportedly his Press Secretary replied, “I wasn’t speaking to you, Mr. President.” (citation lost)

Jesus clearly addressed both audiences when, just before bringing life back to Lazarus, he lifted his eyes to the heavens and spoke. His words were directed to God but were offered for the benefit of persons gathered on that day and on this one, too, providing a summary of Jesus’ ministry. “For the sake of the crowd,” he said, “so that they may believe that you sent me.”

Maybe John skipped telling us about the reaction of Lazarus and his sisters because he wanted to point to Jesus’ larger purpose. That the primary intent of that unexpected outcome was not the incredible joy brought to one family, but rather Jesus’ hope that faith would come to others, including those who would only read about those events centuries later. If so, it makes sense that John moved from the resurrection to the impact on the crowd by saying, “Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.”

Later this morning, Liz Ellis and I begin the latest New Members Class at BMPC. At part of it, I will ask each person to introduce themselves, telling

in part what brought them here. I suspect the stories will vary as is true for each person in this room or watching online.

As some have assembled because this has been their community for years, while others are present because they are seeking that kind of place. Some have gathered because a neighbor invited them or because a member of their family is volunteering this morning, because they are in town visiting a long-time friend, or because their parents insisted. Some have tuned in because they were present for another event at Bryn Mawr—a funeral or wedding, a public lecture, or picking up a child at preschool—and were curious about what happens here on Sunday. I certainly don't know what reason you would name for your presence, but years ago I heard someone say, "We think we come to church for our own reasons, but at the most basic level, we are here because God wants us here."

Our first lesson today points to that reality, too. It recalls the most dramatic event for the people of ancient Israel when God, in dramatic fashion, ensured their freedom. After a succession of plagues, the Pharaoh finally allowed Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Soon thereafter, Pharaoh changes his mind and begins to pursue his former slaves. It comes to the terrifying moment when the people look ahead and see a sea, and looking behind, see Egyptians pursuing them. Moses stretches out his hand, and the water parts, permitting the Israelites to move forward on dry land. The Egyptians pursue and are in the middle of the seabed when our text begins.

The LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." Moses did just that, and soon the pursuers were killed. "Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses."

In subsequent chapters and throughout the Old Testament are accounts of times when the people stop believing or stop trusting in God's provision. Likewise, while John tells us many of the mourners who witnessed the raising of Lazarus came to believe in Jesus, he goes on to tell of others who plotted Jesus' death. Thus, both of our readings point to the mysterious nature of faith.

As those accounts reveal, belief often comes about through what is seen. Both reveal that it could take a dramatic event to get someone's attention. Yet together, those larger narratives reveal that a lasting faith takes hold through the quieter and everyday moments of life.

Kathleen Norris is a writer who was once a member of a small Presbyterian church in South Dakota. In her book *Amazing Grace*, she tells of a time when that congregation was in between pastors, and she was invited to preach. "I was preparing a sermon," she wrote, "and noticed that the bulletin jacket for that Sunday, a mass-produced item from a large religious publishing house, contained an article entitled 'Summer Opportunities.' It suggested that as people spend so much time out doors at baseball games, picnics, or the beach, summer provided Christians with a God-given opportunity to witness to their faith. In my sermon, I said that going up to people at a picnic and asking, 'Do you know the Lord?' was a good way to get yourself stuck with a barbecue fork. And you would deserve it. I thanked the congregation for not using such heavy-handed tactics on me when I first began attending church. They had respected the mystery of faith--it's like a marriage, in that only the two parties involved really know what is going on--and had pretty much left me alone to work out my relationship with God...And I am most grateful.

"The people in the congregation did evangelize in another sense," she went on, "by saying and doing things they probably don't remember. Most likely, they didn't think of it as 'evangelizing'--the name of Jesus, for example, may not have come up--but little things they said or did revealed

their faith in healthy and appealing ways. Something about the way they lived their faith—or even failed to live it, failings I could recognize in myself—convinced me to throw in my lot with them and join the church.

“Once I could recognize evangelism not as a matter of talking about the faith but of living it, I could happily connect it with Ezra Pound’s great admonishment to poets: ‘do not describe, present,’ which in writing workshops is often translated as ‘show, don’t tell.’ In writing, it means allowing the reader an experience of their own rather than attempting to control the response...In evangelism, it means living in such a way that others may be attracted to you and your values, but not taking this as a license to preach to them about the strength and joy that you’ve found in knowing Jesus. You may be aching to tell all about that, but it may not be the right time for it, or the right terminology. The best evangelism—the show, don’t tell kind—presumes an understanding of a relationship that precludes forcing your faith, and the language of that faith, on another person” (Norris, Kathleen. *Amazing Grace*. Riverhead Books:1998, 301-2)

A quiet witness and a public miracle. Jesus uses both to help people claim and celebrate faith. However it begins, his hope and intent as he stood outside Lazarus’ tomb remains the same for today: that there will be an enduring response because of all he has done for our sake.