

Homily040217

LAZARUS! COME OUT! UNTIE HIM AND LET HIM GO FREE!

On three different occasions during his public ministry Jesus raised a person from the dead. There was the daughter of Jairus, a man from Capernaum, a child of 11. Jairus came to get Jesus to come to his home, lay hands on her and cure her. While on the way word reached this young father that his precious daughter had died. Jesus told him not to give up believing. Together they went to the home where Jesus goes into her room, grasps the girl by the hand and helps her rise from her death bed. She was dead but only very recently. Jesus was able to rescue her and return her to life.

The second story is about a widow from the town of Nain. Jesus arrives at Nain just as the funeral procession is moving out of town to the local cemetery. This woman has just lost her son. Older than the girl but still young. As the Scriptures put it: The only son of a widowed mother. Whenever I hear those words I immediately think of Mary whose son Jesus was also the only son of a widowed mother. Perhaps, I wonder, that Jesus might have hoped that his mother Mary would hear of this event and take heart for when his own time would come. Jesus returns the young man to his mother.

And then there is today's story about his good friend Lazarus. This story is still a mystery after two thousand years. Why does Jesus not go right away? If he knows what he is about to do why does he weep outside Lazarus' tomb? Why does Jesus open himself to the criticism of Martha and Mary who love him but cannot understand why he did not come while Lazarus was still alive and cure him? Lord, if you had been here my brother would never have died. It is one thing to raise a young girl moments after her death. Or even a young man dead less than 24 hours. But now, Lazarus is four days dead. In the tomb. Beginning to decay—and thus smell.

How old do you think Lazarus was? It is likely that he was a contemporary of Jesus. It seems as if Jesus sometimes stayed in their home when near Jerusalem. Perhaps Martha, Mary and Lazarus were longtime family friends. In other words, Lazarus is 28, 30, or 32 years old. About Jesus' age. I raise this because our reaction is different when a young a man dies or an old man dies. This is a young man. Everyone comes out for such a death. The name Lazarus comes from the Hebrew name Eleazar. It means God is my help.

In each of the cases I mentioned God indeed helped in and through the person of Jesus of Nazareth whom we believe is the Incarnate Word of God, the Son of the Most High. These three instances establish that Jesus is not simply a miracle worker or a healer. These events establish that Jesus, Son of the Father, is endowed with power over death, recent death or death that took place awhile back. It includes his own death although no one will know that until Easter Sunday. As Jesus stands before the tomb of Lazarus He weeps. He raises his voice and shouts. The dead will be able to hear the voice of this One. And what does Jesus say? "Roll away the stone. Lazarus! Come out!" Imagine how still that cemetery got with all those people who had been crying and sorrowing. And Jesus waits and watches with everyone else. And there is movement. And then a figure appears enshrouded in burial cloths. Imagen if you were there, or that you personally witnessed Lazarus coming out of his grave. Even the dead and buried are not beyond the grace and power of Christ. Ever. And what does Jesus say then? "Untie him and let him go free." And so they do and He gives his dear Lazarus back to his sisters. And nothing in that family will ever be the same.

Untie him and let him go free. Wouldn't you love to hear those words uttered on your behalf by Our Lord? That is what He offers and that is what our faith provides. That is why we are all here today, because there will be a day when each of us faces that moment of our own death. Please listen to the following story from the 19th century.

A long time ago there lived a little boy whose parents had died. He was taken in by an aunt who raised him as her own child. Years later, after he had grown up and left his aunt, he received a letter from her. She was in terminal illness and, from the tone of the letter, he knew she was afraid of death. This man, whom she had raised and touched, wrote her a letter in which he said:

It is now thirty-five years since I, a boy of six, was left quite alone in the world. You sent me word that you would give me a home and be a mother to me. I've never forgotten the day when I made the long journey of ten miles to your house. I can still recall my disappointment when, instead of coming for me yourself, you sent your servant, Caesar, a dark man, to fetch me. I well remember my tears and my anxiety as, perched high on your horse and clinging tight to Caesar, I rode off to my new home.

Night fell before we finished the journey and as it grew dark, I became even more afraid. "Do you think she'll go to bed before I get there?" I asked Caesar anxiously. "Oh no," said Caesar, "she'll be sure to stay up for you. When we get out of these woods, you'll see her light shining in the window."

Presently we did ride out into the clearing and there was your light. I remember that you were waiting at the door; that you put your arms tight around me; that you lifted me—a tired, frightened little boy—down from the horse. You had a fire burning on the hearth; a hot supper waiting on the stove. After supper you took me to my new room. You heard me say my prayers. Then you sat with me until I fell asleep.

You probably realize why I am trying to recall this to your memory now. Very soon, God is going to send for you, and take you to a new home. I'm trying to tell you that you needn't be afraid of the summons or of the strange journey or of the dark messenger of death, God can be trusted. God can be trusted to do as much for you as you did for me so many years ago. At the end of the road you'll find love—and a welcome—waiting. And you'll be safe in God's care. I am going to watch and pray for you until you are out of sight. And I shall wait for the day when I make the same journey myself and find you waiting at the end of the road to greet me." (Rev. William J. Bausch, "Untie him and let him go free" in *Naked and You Clothed Me*, edited by Deacon Jim Kipper. Clear Faith Publishing, 2013).

My friends, death is real for each of us. We lose loved ones along the way. And then one day it is our turn. The message from Jesus as we approach Easter is that we are not to be afraid of death any longer. He is Lord of life and has been given power over death. Let us put our trust in him and be not afraid.