

Do You Believe?

Sermon notes for the sermon

Given by Rev. Dr. Gregory B. Young

On Sunday, April 10, 2011

Several weeks ago my son invited me to watch a video with him. Now, I have to preface what I am about to share with you by saying that both of my boys have made it their personal mission to keep me up-to-date and aware of the values of their peers. They believe that as a pastor I should know what their generation is watching and listening to. With that in mind my youngest son invited me to watch a movie entitled "Zombie Land." If you haven't seen the movie I would not recommend that you run out and rent it. It is not a movie for those with weak of stomachs and unless you enjoy watching the "living dead" cannibalize the living then this movie is not for you. The only reason I share this with you is that about half way through the movie I found myself reflecting on Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead. In some warped way I found myself questioning if Lazarus could have been a zombie. For that matter, perhaps Jairus' daughter, whom Jesus raised from her death bed, was a zombie. The movie I was watching was based on the idea that those who die can, under the right circumstances, come back to life as the living and walking dead.

Now, before you dismiss what I am saying and start working on your shopping list or to-do list for the coming week, I want you to realize that it was the questions and the thought process that was important to me and not the movie I was watching. As I allowed my mind to wander from what I was viewing on the television, I

began to reflect on the sacrament of baptism. At the heart of our understanding of baptism is the idea that through the act of baptism we die to ourselves and rise to new life in Christ. So I found myself asking, does this mean that we are the walking dead? Does this mean we are like zombies, those who have died and come alive, with the difference being that we have come alive in Christ as a community of gracious life living under the reign of God?

In both the reading from Ezekiel and the Gospel of John we hear of life springing forth from death. For the prophet Ezekiel it was a vision of what God was about to do for Israel. The people were defeated, their faith was dead, and they had lost all hope – they were as good as dead and they knew it. In the vision, God brings Ezekiel to the valley of death – a dry, parched land filled with dried up bones; remnants of the life that once was. With God's words on the prophet's tongue the bones come to life with sinews and organs and skin. God ends the vision by commissioning Ezekiel to return to his people and speak the vision that God will bring life to his dead people.

In the Gospel reading we hear of the death of Lazarus, brother to Mary and Martha and friend to Jesus. Jesus and his disciples were in northern Israel when he received word that Lazarus was seriously ill. The reason that Jesus and his disciples were in northern Israel and not near Jerusalem was that the Pharisees had confronted Jesus and tried to stone him and his disciples to death for blasphemy. They left Jerusalem and headed north, crossing the Jordan River for safety. While Jesus and his disciples delay in responding to Mary and Martha's request to come and heal Lazarus, Lazarus dies. Upon arriving in Bethany, they learn that Lazarus has been dead and buried for four days. It is into this

scene that Jesus enters and works the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead. Let's take a closer look at this story.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ according to John is based on the understanding that Jesus is the Son of God, existing before creation was brought to life and through him all things came into being. Further, it is a statement of faith that the Son of God then entered our life for the sole purpose of redeeming humanity. Of all four Gospels, John's portrays Jesus as clearly in control of all of the events surrounding his life with a clear understanding of all that was to happen to him. The account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead clearly portrays Jesus as all-knowing and all-powerful.

When Jesus learns of Lazarus' illness he makes no move to go to Bethany. He stays in hiding and the disciples surely saw this as a wise move. The Pharisees in Jerusalem had just tried to kill them for blasphemy and so returning to a suburb of Jerusalem, Bethany, could potentially put Jesus and them in danger. In delaying two days before travelling to Bethany to visit Lazarus, Jesus knew that Lazarus was dead. In fact, I am certain that Jesus knew that Lazarus had been dead for four days when he and his disciples arrived in Bethany. Jesus clarifies Lazarus' death when the disciples misunderstand and say that Lazarus is just sleeping. Jesus looks them in the eyes and says to them "Lazarus is dead." As they leave their place of hiding Thomas is quoted as saying "Let us also go, that we may die with him." This, I believe was a sarcastic statement meant to emphasize the danger of their returning to Jerusalem. The Pharisees tried to kill them once and will be on the watch for them.

Jesus' meeting with Martha and with Mary is a meeting of faith. Both women point out that if Jesus had been present during Lazarus' illness he could have cured him. Since he has arrived four days

after Lazarus' death the thought is that Jesus has come to console Martha and Mary. Martha is questioned by Jesus and she reveals her belief in the resurrection of the righteous, a commonly held Jewish belief of their time. When Jesus states that he is the resurrection and the life Martha states that she believes that Jesus is the Messiah. In meeting Mary Jesus comes to see that her grief is so great that she can only weep and express her belief that if Jesus had come earlier he could have healed her brother.

Then we have this phrase "Jesus began to weep." Just three sentences before this phrase the Gospel writer states "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed." Are Jesus' tears a sign of his compassion for those who were in grief? Were they his own tears of grief when he realized that Lazarus was really dead? He knew what he was about to do so why would he be moved to tears of compassion. He knew days before that Lazarus had died and he told his disciples that it was to bring glory to God. So why did Jesus weep? Could it have been that he was looking ahead to what was going to happen to himself on a cross? Perhaps in Martha's and Mary's grieving he saw a foreshadowing of what would happen to his mother, Mary, and all of those who had placed their hope in him as the Messiah. Maybe Jesus was utterly frustrated with the fact that those closest to him still did not understand him and his mission. We will never know why Jesus was moved to tears and it is probably a combination of all that I have said and more.

Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead is very quick just like his other miracles. The point is not the actual miracle but in the reactions of people before and following the miracle. Jesus commands the stone to be rolled away from the entrance to the tomb – a foreshadowing of what will happen after Jesus is buried in a tomb?

Then Martha stops the process to point out that there will be a very foul odor since Lazarus' body has been buried for four days. There was no embalming and no casket or coffin, the Jews bury their dead in a way that leads to fast decomposition. Nevertheless, Jesus commands that the stone be rolled back and then calls forth dead Lazarus. "Lazarus, come out!" The dead friend of Jesus now come to life slowly emerges from the tomb with his hands and feet bound. Jesus then commands, "Unbind him, and let him go." That's it, the miracle is done and the story ends with Jews who had come from Jerusalem to console Martha and Mary believing that Jesus is the Messiah.

Do you believe? We have received this story from our ancestors and we must answer Jesus' question just as Martha had to answer it for herself and just as our forebears had to: Jesus said, "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. Do you believe this?" Do you believe?