

Lessons From Lazarus

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April 6, 2014. Pastor Keith preaches on the lessons of faith we can learn from the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

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Near the very end of his gospel, the writer John says, "Now these things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." And this story about Jesus and Lazarus, and the other people involved, is a story that tells us what this believing for the sake of having life is like. It shows us what some of the dimensions of this faith are like, and what life with faith can look like. As we think of different characters we've heard about in this story we have read, we've seen faith at work in at least five different ways.

For one thing, we hear Mary and Martha react to Jesus when he finally gets to them. We hear how faith has a basic trust, but how it leaves room to grow. Their faith grew from where they were before Jesus came that time. When both Martha and Mary approached Jesus, each one demonstrated that Jesus had the ability to heal Lazarus. They said, "If you'd been here Lord, you could have healed him. He would not have died." So they had this basic belief that Jesus was good and Jesus had this power to heal someone. It was a good faith, and likely more faith than most of the people around them had — who were still very doubtful about Jesus, and sometimes against Jesus. Yet we know that all along, there was even more in store for them to know about, and more for them to grow in faith. Jesus had more in mind than to simply heal Lazarus from an illness. Jesus had something more he was going to use. He had an intention for this time. So Jesus timed his arrival especially late, so that their faith could be stretched. Not only would Jesus heal Lazarus, he would bring him back to life from death. Jesus gives the sign here that he's about more than just sustaining physical life. He's about having life itself. Jesus structured his visit so that this would be apparent. He intentionally waited those extra days after the call for help came to him, so that Lazarus would be thoroughly dead, so there could be no thought that he just kind of passed out for a while and was coming back to life. He was officially dead after four days. Jesus wanted the faith in Mary and Martha to grow. They had that basic belief that he could heal. Jesus shows their faith has room to grow. It can grow to believe that Jesus brings life from death.

There's a good reminder for us in this lesson. How often does God do more for us than we even expected God would do? There are those times when we'd be happy if this or that came out of a certain situation, but maybe even more goodness comes out of it than we thought would come from it. Maybe there's not just a healed body, but a healed relationship that comes out of some medical thing. Maybe we believe in such a way that we'll be happy if only one good thing comes out of it, and many more good things come out of it. Or faith is shown that we believe so much, but even more God is capable to give to us. Faith has room to grow.

A second lesson about faith from this story is that faith tolerates what it cannot understand. That is, faith has a growing edge that sometimes is kind of difficult. Just as growth in many things happens only with growing pains, so growth in faith comes with a measure of difficulty. Faith understands this, and faith accepts difficult times as times to grow. In this story both Martha and Mary blame Jesus. Their anger shows. While they're glad to see Jesus, because their faith had expectations of Jesus they were upset that he didn't come sooner. "If you had been here, Lazarus would not have died." The disciples also questioned Jesus. They tried to dissuade him from going near Bethany, which is in Judea

where Lazarus lived, because they feared that Jesus would be stoned by the Jews were out to get him, if not they themselves. Their faith had a growing edge here also. For all of them, their faith came to a new and deeper place, but they had to go through a painful time to get there. This wasn't easy for any of them. They all had to go through an experience they would have preferred to avoid. Disciples would have preferred to stay where they were and not go to Judea. Mary and Martha would have preferred for Jesus to come early so that he could heal Lazarus while he was still alive. But they all came to a deeper faith, which received an even greater gift than they first imagined. But it came with difficulty.

How often doesn't it happen for us — that the way for our faith to grow could not have come by an easier path and we think we'd prefer an easier way, but maybe there's something difficult we need to go through and that grows our faith? Maybe there's an illness we would have happily gone without. Maybe there's some circumstance in life, maybe related to our work or our career or our relationship. Maybe there was a really hard way for us, involving a loss of something or someone. Yet it started and worked with our faith, and our faith was able to have a growing edge, and we came to an even deeper relationship with God than we were before, and a deeper appreciation of the life that God gives.

A third thing we see about faith in this story is that it cares with feeling. Faith is not something of just one dimension. It's not just something we do with our mind and say we believe. Faith, by its nature, involves other parts of life. Faith cares for others. Along the lines that James says, "Faith without works is dead," we could say that faith involves love. While love is apparent on many levels of this story — there are great relationships between Jesus and Mary and Martha and Lazarus and the disciples — it involves one of the deepest signs of emotions that we hear in any of the gospels. It says, in fact, that Lazarus was one who was loved by Jesus. It says that Jesus weeps on the way to the tomb. We're not exactly sure if he was weeping because of the loss of Lazarus, or because he was weeping in sympathy with all the others who were so sad about the death of Lazarus. But either way, Jesus has lots of empathy here. Jesus, even in his faith, has love for others. We know that Jesus does weep here. And at that time, Jesus shows his faith by speaking to the Father. And he says, "Father I do this. I pray to you now that I will be raising Lazarus," he's saying. "And I do this as a way to show them that I have this faith in you." The faith of Jesus even involves a love that cares deeply. It brings out his full emotions and his deepest love. Faith is like that. Our faith is showing when we care about others, whether family or friends or of others who suffer hardship or discrimination, or Christians who are being persecuted, or others in the world having a hard time. Our faith brings us to feel for them and to care for them, so that we do what we can to ease their situation.

The fourth lesson about faith in this story is that faith believes unto death. In the early part of the story when Jesus is with his disciples, he comes to this decision to go to Judea. And at first they don't understand. But he says it's for Lazarus' sake, and Lazarus has died. And then Thomas says we too must go, that we may die with him. They'd just been talking about how dangerous it was and how lethal it could be to go there, yet Thomas voices his faith that's ready to go. He has a faith that's ready to die with and for Jesus. This is the same Thomas who, after the resurrection, had a hard time believing it. But his basic faith grows to accept this new reality of Jesus, that Jesus is the resurrected Lord. This Thomas goes through a hard time with the other disciples as the Jewish council, based on what Jesus does with Lazarus, decides Jesus is too dangerous — and they actively start to kill Jesus then, to go after him, to arrest him. Thomas knows about that, and Thomas has a love and a heart that's deep. And as he comes through this very painful time, and is helped along by Jesus, he finally says after the resurrection with a faith deeper than before, "My Lord and my God." From then on and once again, he puts his life on the line. Thomas is able to say: my faith leaves me even to be willing to die. As tradition has it, he went to India for the sake of Jesus and died a martyr's death. Thomas, like his Lord, has a faith unto death and lives it out to the end.

The faith commitment we make with Jesus is deep. We follow the one who believed the mission all the way to the cross, and we follow him. We need a strong community to do this, other people with us to do this. And we need the marks that we make by baptism and by membership in a community, marks which set us apart and say: I'm with this group and I'm with the Lord too. I also myself say, "My Lord and my God," each one of us says. And we follow where our Lord leads us, no matter how difficult the path may be.

There's at least one more lesson about faith in this story. It's a joyful end, but there's something undone. We just kind of talked about it with the children here. Lazarus was out of the tomb. He's alive, but he's not free to go. He's all bound up. And so Jesus has to say, "Unbind him and let him go." He can't unbind himself. His hands are all tied up. He needs help to do this. Being people of faith means we are the ones who do the unbinding where God has set people in the world free. God has freed the world. God has given new life. Sometimes people are still bound up where they are and don't know the freedom, and don't know the life that God wants them to have. God's faithful ones are the ones who do the freeing of others. God's faithful ones have seen what God is up to, and have a word to share with others so that they can see what God has done for them. And as Jesus did so often, and touched people's eyes so that they could see, and then he would send them on their way with new life, God's faithful ones today are the unbinders. We are people who are unbound ourselves, and so we help others become unbound from the fetters of their lives. We can help people's eyes become open so that they can see another way to live, what God has in mind for them.

So there are at least five ways here we can learn about faith in this story. First of all that faith, even though it has a basic trust, still has room to grow. Secondly a faith has growing edges, sometimes difficult, as it gets deeper. We know thirdly that faith cares with feeling and love. We know fourthly that faith believes unto death. And fifthly, faith acts as it responds to the command of Jesus: to unbind those who have been given new life and set free, and to help them in that process. May we all let the means that God gives us — through his word, through baptisms, through communion, and through the good word of one another — find faith that is nourished and that grows in these ways. Amen.

And now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

2014, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Pastor Keith Holste, John 11:1-45, James 2:17