

Resurrection Sightings

By: Keith Holste

April 2, 2017. Jesus tells us that the new life he brings is something not just to be believed in or confessed, but to be experienced. Where have we seen new life in Jesus around us? Pastor Keith preaches on how the story of Jesus giving new life to Lazarus is central to the Gospel of John. This word of life, this resurrection sighting, was an organizing principle for the early Christians. How do our lives today hinge on this Jesus who gives new life?

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We begin in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our gospel today comes from the exact middle of John's gospel, and that's important for several reasons. One of them is that, given the way that literature was interpreted then, especially by the Jews, the middle was the main thing. It provided the organizing principle for the whole writing. So in our lesson today about Lazarus and Jesus, it's like a hinge. The whole book of John turns on this story. Before this, Jesus is going about teaching and performing miracles. This is the seventh and last, and most significant, miracle or sign leading up to his death and resurrection. But from here on out everything changes, as you can tell from those few verses I just read. Now he will soon be headed for Jerusalem for his last days. It seems like this particular story was included in the Book of John, in this important place, because it reflected the position of life of those who were hearing this gospel read. John is thought to have been written somewhere between the year 80 and 100. This is a time when the Romans were still in control. John is thought to have perhaps written this in hiding on the island of Patmos, as he was in exile from the Romans. This is a signal to us that this is written for a people for whom a choice for Jesus was just as risky as the choices Jesus had to make as he came to Bethany to do this deed. It was a risky place to be.

Throughout the past few months, we've been mentioning the movement of Jesus in the early days of his ministry. He would go from Nazareth, to the River Jordan, to Capernaum, and each of these had significance because of the politics that was around. Each was an important place, a place for a reason, because he needed sanctuary or safety in a certain place. Now he's called to Bethany, for Lazarus, just a couple of miles from Jerusalem. He hesitates to go. There are many interpretations of this, but the strongest argument to me is that it means his final commitment to go to the cross. As our reading ended in these verses I just read, how the giving of life to Lazarus meant that the authorities would begin the process of arresting Jesus so they could put him to death.

So the readers, the original audience of the Book of John, didn't think this was just an interesting story about Jesus doing a phenomenal thing. To be in his predicament is where they were in life. The movements they would make, the places they would go, would put their lives in danger. How could they live out the life of Jesus in their day and in their place? Would they go into exile? Would they leave home and go to another place? Would they stay and be quiet, or would they stay and be obvious about their illegal faith? Would they take steps like Jesus did which would put them in danger? And as they made movements they would be asked tough questions like Jesus was. They would need to answer in sensitive ways, as Jesus did. They would on occasion say what they believed.

Martha is seen as confessing her faith as a Christian, on her own day, but as the model of the person who could speak the faith of the church. "I know that my brother will rise again in the resurrection on

the last day." It's a confession of faith. She believes in the resurrection of the body. And, "Yes Lord, I believe that you are the messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." She's the model Christian — and a woman at that — who speaks at the outright summary confession of who Jesus is and what Jesus is about, the most important place in the Book of John: in the middle of it. This is the key thing to know.

Her sister Mary is a little different. Just as we in our day say we have different preferred spiritual modes, and just as maybe some of us are more left-brained and some of us are more right-brained, some of us have logical statements of faith, and that's kind of how we see our faith, like in statements like the Creed. Others of us are more creative about it and think of our faith in different ways. Maybe we're more like Mary, who wanted to be near the Lord, we know. She wanted to sit by his side when he was at their house. But at this time she expresses her faith by saying, through her tears, "If you'd been here Lord, Lazarus would not have died."

Meanwhile here, just as every action of Jesus was provoking comment and reaction from the other religious authorities and people, we can guess that those early Christians in the days of John were provoking actions from religious authorities also and from the governmental authorities. People were reacting to them. To accept the new life that Jesus brings is not a neutral thing. It provokes reaction. We will ask ourselves: will we, as Mary and Martha did, remain firm in our faith that Jesus is the one who brings life?

I said earlier that this main, middle story of John was the organizing principle of his whole gospel. This life that Jesus gives is the organizing principle for us as Christians. It was at the core of Martha's pivotal confession of faith. And so it was a main thing in the lives of those early Christians who lived in risky times. Can we say that this word of life that was there for Martha and for them is our organizing principle for life? Does our life hinge on this Jesus who came to give life, and did this to such a degree that he was willing to die for our sakes so that we might have life? That's really what happened here in this story. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, and the response of the authorities was the plot to kill him. Because in their view if he kept on doing these life-giving things, everyone would believe in him and the Romans would come and destroy their buildings — which indeed happened. The high priest declares it's better for one man to die than for the nation to be destroyed.

We have to acknowledge that often, the world prefers things the way they are rather than to have new life. People like the positions they are in. They like the way things are around them. They often resist the changes that would mean fuller life for more people. Bringing new life and changing the status quo so often meets resistance. What Jesus tells the people to do in the story with Lazarus, he says, "Go, unbind him and let him go." That seems to be a word that Jesus gives to all of us who live by his command and by the life that he brings. It's a challenge for us to see where life is bound in the world and not being lived freely and fully. Where can lives be unbound so that the new life Jesus brings can come and give that new life? Where do we see that in our worlds? How can we be the ones who bring and allow the life-giving word of Jesus, through both words and actions, so that those who are bound can be freed to have and enjoy what Jesus wants all people to have? This might be with individuals who are bound up, or with groups of people small or large who, due to physical or mental or economic conditions are stuck in a place that's not fruitful, and with encouragement and leadership and assistance might be able to break forth into a new place in life.

Kind of related to this idea, it's been pointed out that so often when we talk about new life in the context of the resurrection, that it's kind of a subject of something that is to be believed in, something we confess in the creeds. It's something which really can't be comprehended. But what Jesus is saying

here is that it's really something to experience. A person came up to a friend of ours who was preaching, and preached in such a way in her sermon that when people came out to greet her at the end, one woman said, "That was a resurrection moment." The person that heard the words of the preacher through the work of the Holy Spirit, so she felt new life had come to her at that moment — she had had, we might say, a resurrection experience. Lazarus was raised from the dead by Jesus to have a new life. It wasn't something he believed in, or just said, "I believe" (in the words of the Apostles Creed) "that Jesus is risen from the dead and I will be raised one day." He received the new life, and Lazarus was able to live it.

So the new life God gives us in Christ is more than just something we believe in for after death, or more than something we try to comprehend and make theological explanations about. The resurrection word we hear, just as Lazarus heard the words, "Lazarus, come out," is a word of promise to us, that calls us out to live in a new way: in the light of Jesus. It's not a theory, it's not an ambiguous promise, but it's real. It's a relationship with God that's lived out in the present. New life given to us by Jesus.

In recent weeks we've heard how this has shown up in the lives of people as Jesus has encountered them. A few weeks ago we heard about the woman at the well in conversation with Jesus. Resurrection came to her and she had new life. Last week we heard of a man born blind who was healed by Jesus and came to new life in Jesus. Lazarus heard his name called out, and rose from the tomb and came out. In baptism, God has called us to new life. He has unbound us and freed us to live new life in his name. Resurrection isn't about just what happens after life. It starts already, and it's about living our lives in faith, that we have already been called out to live this kind of life every day.

Sometimes with the youth we talk about: where have you seen God today? Where is a God sighting in your life? We discuss, for they have seen God active in their lives. Maybe we should think in terms of "resurrection sightings." Where have we seen the new life of Jesus in our lives or around us? When has Jesus said to us, as he said to Lazarus, "Come out?" And now that's given us new life, and has shown up as a resurrection sighting in our lives — as we live in ways that show this life that he has given, not only to Lazarus, but to us.

But this isn't easy work to do. As Jesus found out, as the disciples found out, as the early Christians found out, there is resistance all around. It's hard work living resurrected lives. And so we need strengthening to do that. We need the nourishment of the Lord's meal to keep it up. We give thanks to God for the new life we have in Jesus, as we receive the bread and wine of this meal. We pray that God strengthens us to live as ones unbound and freed by Jesus. And as we receive this meal we cherish the company of fellow resurrected ones, as we receive the meal together to go out and live lives of resurrection. And this morning we're so happy that seven new of our young children will receive this meal with us. They'll join this fellowship of resurrected ones. Having been baptized already they have this life, and they can join with us be this band of people sharing the Lord's risen presence, as he promises us resurrection as well.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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