

*Preaching Jesus Christ Today**

John 11:38–44

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Lazarus is dead. His sisters are weeping. Friends and neighbors have come to their house with their casseroles and cakes. Every group of people has customs surrounding death. At the very least, these rituals of food and phone calls, texts and stopping by keep us busy. They give us something to do when the bottom falls out of our lives. That's what's going on after the death of Lazarus. The house is full, neighbors coming and going. John writes that in the middle of this, Mary quickly gets up and leaves her house. The crowd thinks she's going to Lazarus's tomb to weep over her dead brother, and they follow. But Mary surprises them. Instead, she goes out to meet Jesus, whose arrival has been delayed. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died," she says to him (John 11:32). She's crying, her neighbors and friends are crying, and so is Jesus. They all go together to see the tomb: Mary, Jesus, the crowd from her house, folks they pick up along the way, small children from the village. It's a mixed group gathered around Lazarus's tomb. John describes it for us. Some are moved by Jesus. "See how he loved him," they say (v. 36). Some are, at best, skeptical. "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" (v. 37). Some probably have never heard of Jesus. It's a mixed crowd, like any family or town, like any funeral crowd.

Lazarus's tomb is a cave with a stone laid in front of it. It's a lot like the one that will shortly be Jesus' own. By this time, Martha, Lazarus's other sister, has joined the growing and weeping crowd at the tomb. "Take away the stone," Jesus says to Martha. "It's been four days, Jesus," Martha says. "It will smell terrible" (11:39). In response to her protest, Jesus says something that seems out of place in this story of grief and loss, neighbors, stench, and tears. He says, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" (v. 40). If you believed, you would see the glory of God. Here? In a tomb with a four-day-old corpse, Jesus tells us we are going to see God's glory? It's not surprising, is it, that John tells us that some members of the crowd were skeptical.

So here's my question for us. Help me answer it. Where in this story do we see God's glory? We talk about God's glory all the time in church. The whole earth is full of his glory, we sing. Our psalm today names Jesus as the King of glory. Glory is something we can see or at least apprehend. It is the reality of God, of who God is for the world, made visible. His powerful love brings into existence what is not, brings new life out of our broken lives and world, and brings about his purposes for creation. His glory is this life-giving love made visible. So, back to my question: where in this story do we see this—God's glory?

And here's a second question that is important to ask for those of us who try to

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respond to God's love as we go about our days: what are we supposed to do with what we see? Back to the story. After telling Martha that if she believes, she will see God's glory, Jesus prays to his Father. It's an odd prayer, don't you think? Because Jesus doesn't pray for dead Lazarus. He doesn't pray for his heartbroken sisters. He doesn't even pray for himself. Instead he prays on behalf of the folks who seem the least in need of prayer: the crowd, the whole motley group who have left their casseroles and cakes in Mary's house and followed her and Jesus to Lazarus's tomb. Listen to what Jesus prays: "Father, 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" (11:42). He prays for them and then responds to the situation that has brought them to this tomb, Lazarus's death. You know what Jesus does. With a loud voice he cries, "Lazarus, come out!" (11:43). What happens? The stone has been rolled away, and in response to Jesus's voice, Lazarus, who had died, comes out. He is in his burial clothes, which are strips of cloth bound around his hands, face, and feet. Then Jesus does this: with Lazarus standing in front of him, bound in his burial clothes, Jesus turns to the crowd. He turns to the gathered crowd of family, believers, skeptics, and everyone else—that is, those on whose behalf he has just prayed. He turns to them and says, "Unbind him, and let him go" (v. 44). There is something odd about Jesus calling to Lazarus in a loud voice, isn't there? "Lazarus, come out!"

Can dead men hear? Could Lazarus hear Jesus's voice any more than the dry bones of Israel could hear Ezekiel preaching to them? Is this where we see God's glory? Yes, certainly. God's Word creates life out of nothing, just as God spoke into the formless void and brought about the heavens and earth out of nothing. Here that same Word made flesh speaks into the tomb of the dead Lazarus. Out of nothing, out of death itself, God brings life. Isn't this who Jesus is—the resurrected one for all of us? How could this be anything other than God's glory seen in Jesus?

Now, there is more to the story, another detail so obvious that we move right past it. When Lazarus comes out from the tomb, where does he stand? Luke tells us he stands before the one who has called to him, Jesus. He stands before the one to whom the Father always listens. He stands, given new life, before the one the Father sent.

But this is not all, is it? He stands before the crowd, which has followed Mary from her house to the tomb. The crowd includes family, onlookers, believers, skeptics, the neighborhood kids, and everyone in between, the crowd Jesus has just prayed for and has instructed to unbind Lazarus — Lazarus stands before them as well. Lazarus stands in front of everyone gathered around his tomb who has seen the glory of God. So can you see what's going on? The new life Jesus gives Lazarus is not just for him, grateful as he might be. Or for his sisters. Or even for those who believe in Jesus. It is for everyone there. Sisters, skeptics, neighbors, and kids see in Lazarus the promise Jesus makes to us. The promise is this: after our deaths, we will stand, like Lazarus, before the one the Father has sent, Jesus Christ. Because through his own death, Jesus has made death a servant of life. This promise is our hope. It is the hope of God's people across time, made first to Israel, and from Israel to the church, and from the church to all nations. It is the hope that carries us through the burial of our dead. We proclaim this as we bury them: "I know that my Redeemer liveth and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth; and though this body be destroyed, yet I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself and mine eyes shall behold, who is a friend and not a stranger."¹

So is this it as well? God's glory? How could it not be? Seeing God face-to-face and realizing he is a friend and no stranger. Yes, our recognition of Christ as friend will certainly be glorious. Ah, but the story of Lazarus gives us an even fuller picture of what God's glory will look like. And it helps us answer the second question I asked: when we see God's glory—now—what are we supposed to do with it? How do we respond? How many of us have asked the following question to someone who (we hope) can give us an answer? When we die, will we see our loved ones? Will I see my wife? My brother who died as a child? Will I get to see my best friend? Today, here, Jesus answers that question. Lazarus stands before Jesus, who is his friend and not a stranger (Job 19:27). But he stands there also with the crowd that brought cakes and casseroles to Mary's house and then followed her to his tomb. With the ones who witnessed the whole thing. With the ones Jesus tells to unbind Lazarus from his burial clothes. With the ones Jesus prays for. At the resurrection of the dead, will we see our loved ones? Jesus' answer is yes, yes indeed—and not only your loved ones but your loved ones and those not so easy to love.

Here is the fullness of God's glory for us to apprehend. When we stand before God after our deaths, we will not stand alone. We will stand with the risen and ascended Christ. We will stand with our loved ones. And not only with our loved ones. Isn't this, as Paul says in Ephesians 2, what Jesus came, lived, died, and rose for? To draw all people to himself? Isn't this why, through his death, he broke down the dividing walls of hostility between peoples, made friends of strangers, neighbors of those who had been far off? Isn't this what the Father sent him for, so that all things—all things in heaven and earth—may be made one in him? So it's not surprising that when Lazarus stands before the one who has given him new life, a crowd gathers around him. Those he loves are there, to be sure; but as we heard, not only them. You see, right here—as Lazarus stands in front of Jesus, surrounded by the others—God points us to the place we are to look to see God's glory. That place includes where we stand now and not only with our loved ones. Where we stand with neighbors, skeptics, kids, with those who share our faith, with those who scoff at it, and with those who have never heard of Jesus.

I realize now that I once saw God's glory in the strangest place: in an old, half-blind dog. I had parishioners in a long-standing Bible study who found it almost impossible to love each other. They'd known each other for years. One was a cranky, opinionated elderly woman who had been a nurse, and the others were an equally opinionated, somewhat inflexible couple, both doctors. They were at odds on everything: politics, the church, health care—all of which came out in the Bible study. Toward the end of her life, the elderly woman grew too weak to care for her dog. Her daughter couldn't take him. She was distraught. This couple, who had sparred with her for so long, took her dog. They cared for it for the rest of its life. Each time I saw that dog, well-fed and groomed—each time I saw how happy that dog made them—I think I saw God's glory. Why? Remember the promise Jesus makes to Martha when she tells him her brother is dead? "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" This couple knew they were bound to this difficult woman in Christ. They knew that death didn't get them off the hook. We didn't do so well with getting along, they told me, but here they were, still bound to this difficult woman through her old, half-blind dog. And loving him. That is what glory looks like, I think.

Now, if I can see God's glory in such a small act, imagine what is possible. Right

here. As we stand now — not after our deaths — as we stand now with those we will stand with eternally. With those we find difficult to love. With those the world finds expendable. We don't stand with them because it's the right thing to do — that won't get us very far. We stand with them because, with Mary and Martha, we believe Jesus is the resurrected one and he has bound us together, which means we are stuck with each other, now and after our deaths. Isn't this why Christ has given us his life, so we have the strength and grace to stand with others, instead of ignoring them or running away?

We stand and, joined to Christ, are not pushed over or knocked aside. What about those who live around our church, on this corner? Do they see God's glory through us? What about our kids? They're always watching. And our colleagues and friends? God's glory? None of them will use that term. But we know what it is and where to look to see it. So if God gives us the eyes to recognize who will be standing with us when we see Jesus face-to-face — and there is going to be a crowd — don't you think God wants us to begin to get to know them now? And love them now? In Christ we are already bound to them eternally. Believe it, he says to us, as he said to Martha. Believe it and begin to get to know them now. Stand with them now and you will be witnesses to my glory.

Note

1 *Book of Common Prayer*, "Burial of the Dead: Rite II" (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1962), 491; cf. Job 19:25–26.