

Sermon for Sunday 22 March 2026, the 5th Sunday of Lent (Start of Passiontide)

Texts: Ezekiel 37.1-14; Romans 8.6-11; John 11.1-45

Remove the stone

It may not be right to describe the raising of Lazarus as a dress rehearsal for the forthcoming passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. But it is very significant that St John has placed this event, the seventh and final of the signs of Jesus' glory, just here in his gospel. It occurs just after Jesus has narrowly avoided being stoned to death by Jews in Jerusalem who take offence at his teaching, and he escapes to the area east of the river Jordan. St John is showing us that Jesus' ministry is coming to a climax and in this sense, what happens with the rising of Lazarus, both points to and prepares all those involved for what lies ahead.

It is preparation time for all concerned. For the disciples who have followed Jesus to Bethany at the dogged insistence of Thomas and are just starting to glimpse the cost of discipleship. For Martha and Mary who have buried their brother Lazarus and will now witness the extraordinary reality of his return to life. For Jesus himself both in what he will experience and what he will reveal. And for Mary and Martha's community who will be stirred to a deeper level of consciousness through what they witness and will also have to make a choice as a consequence whether they follow Jesus or reject him.

For us too as we enter Passiontide, the raising of Lazarus challenges us to confront our deepest fears and the darkest aspects of our lives. Jesus' raising of Lazarus doesn't wave a magic wand over our fears and sinfulness saying, "There, there, all will be well". Rather, it points us to see that we will only confront these fears and the reality of our own sinfulness, if we place our hands into the hands of Jesus and are prepared to walk with him in the path that will lead first to Calvary before the joy of the resurrection morning.

The death and subsequent raising of Lazarus involves all who are caught up in this event in a journey of faith which will have dramatic consequences.

Both Martha and Mary, the two sisters of the dead man, have much to work through when they encounter Jesus. They are bewildered and maybe even angry that even though they had sent a messenger when Lazarus became ill, Jesus hadn't come until now. They were having to confront their own sense of guilt and helplessness, just as we do, particularly when someone we love, dies quickly and unexpectedly. What else could I have done to save them? What if we had called Jesus earlier? What if he had come earlier.

Martha, and I would suspect, Mary too, believed, as did many Pharisaic Jews at that time, that the dead would be raised at the Last Day. But this was little consolation to them now in the raw anguish of their grief. Jesus however reveals to Martha, that he is Messiah and very source of life itself, "I am the resurrection and the life" and she comes to faith in him.

The community of Bethany along with the Jews who have come to console Mary and Martha in their grief, also pass through an immense journey of faith as they witness the unthinkable – a dead man restored to life. It is very significant that this miracle of Jesus takes place in front of the whole community.

For Jesus, the events surrounding the rising of Lazarus are a watershed in his own ministry in many ways. In the gospels, we learn that Jesus had restored two other people to life – the son of the widow of Nain and the young daughter of Jairus, the leader of the synagogue. But in both cases, they had only recently died. Also, in the case of Jairus' daughter, Jesus insisted that the crowd was sent out of the room while he performed this miracle quietly. But here, Lazarus has been dead and buried for four days and Jesus is facing a crowd.

He also encounters the raw grief of Martha and then of Mary. As Mary kneels before him weeping and he sees the Jews who were with her also weeping, St John tells us that Jesus himself began to weep. It is a deep, visceral grief on many different levels. Jesus enters into the grief of Martha and Mary whom he loved as friends. He grieves as God himself, the incarnate Word weeping for his people in their frailty and mortality. He is also, I imagine, weeping for what he knew would now befall him. For perhaps it is at this very moment that Jesus realises that the only way to raise humankind from the grip of death would be through his own sacrificial death on the Cross.

Even at the very point when Jesus moves towards the tomb, some of the crowd are already raising doubts about him, saying "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?". But despite this, Jesus orders them to remove the stone. Martha, ever the practical sister remonstrates. For Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days in a hot country, decay will have set in and the stench will be terrible. But Jesus responds to her, "Did I not tell you if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So, they remove the stone. Jesus gives thanks to God for hearing him so that the crowd who see this may believe. Then he summons Lazarus with a great shout, "Lazarus, come out". We can imagine the extraordinary, terrifying moment of waiting and expectation. Then the dead man comes out and Jesus commands them to unbind him and let him go.

So what do we take from this extraordinary story of Lazarus – the seventh and greatest of Jesus' seven signs in St John's Gospel?

First, this is a sign for us to reflect deeply on. As we start Passiontide today, Jesus is inviting us to follow him in the journey of his Passion. It's a journey in which we are led to confront our deepest fears regarding our human and mortality – our terror of and denial of death.

Linked to this, we are asked to look honestly at ourselves in the light of Jesus, to confront the inner darkness within ourselves – those things which we can barely dare to acknowledge to ourselves, let alone the world. These are the tombs of our own making, those tombs of fear, prejudice, greed and anger which imprison us and those habits of sin which seal the mouths of these tombs, cutting us off in darkness.

We can only do this if we journey with Jesus for otherwise, we are trapped in the darkness, When Jesus tells his disciples after they hear of the death of Lazarus, that they are going to Judea again, they try to dissuade him pointing out that he has only just narrowly escaped death there. But Jesus tells them that if they walk in the light of day, they will not stumble. Jesus *is* that light, the light of the world. If we put our trust in him and our hand into his, we can indeed enter into the darkness of our deepest fears and guilt, knowing that he will help us to face them.

It is the time too, as we journey with Jesus, to ask ourselves what is our deepest hope? What is our greatest desire? Lazarus heard the voice of Jesus, the voice of love, summoning him out of his tomb to life? Is this our desire too? And what is the tomb in which we are currently entombed? Can we name this before God?

Passiontide is also a time in which we as a community can reflect, in penitence, about where either consciously or unconsciously may have entombed others. This may have happened through our fear of the unknown, concern of those we maybe see as a challenge to our faith community; or those who raise difficult and disturbing questions for us. As we approach a time of transition and change in the life of Holy Trinity, it's a good time to reflect on this and to ask what help do we seek from God at this time, to help us move the stone to bring others to fullness of life.

On the news this week, I heard of an amazing new invention which has just won a major design award in the UK as it is likely to transform the lives of those suffering from the early stages of dementia. It is a pair of glasses which relay to the wearer helpful prompts in how to cope with the activities of daily life which they might now be struggling, for example a reminder with a visual back up on how to operate the toaster or buy a travel ticket. It's a wonderful example of how an invention of this type can help remove the stones of fear and feelings of helplessness affecting those in the early stages of dementia, to enable them to adjust to life and cope. It is also a great image of hope of a development which can transform the lives of men and women to new hope at a time, in which tragically as a world, we seem set on destroying and diminishing the lives of others not building them up.

In our daily lives, each one of us faces a number of mini deaths, which take many forms including bereavements we suffer, loss of ending of jobs, children leaving home, diminishing health, loneliness, and sometimes abrupt ending of dreams in which we had placed much hope, And each of these can be very hard to bear,

However, Jesus's raising of Lazarus points us to the reality that the God who called us into life and will live out that love for us even on the Cross, never abandons us in our darkness. Instead, like Jesus calling to Lazarus, God summons us to new life and hope and calls us to proclaim hope to others.

So as we journey with our Lord in the days ahead on his way to Calvary, may we do so in the assurance that we travel with the one who is the very source of life itself and calls us out of darkness to new life. As his words echo in our ears and hearts, may we cry to Him to remove the stones which entomb us and in turn, to seek ourselves to remove those stones which will set others free. **Amen**

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