

John 11:1-45

"Rising Again"

Lazarus. The man who was raised from the dead by Christ. Lazarus wasn't just dead, he was dead. He had past the point that his spirit had left his body. He was in clothes. He was beginning to decompose. He was gone. There was nothing anyone could do to bring him back. He was dead.

Yet from our reading though, we know that death is not the end. In fact Christ comes back to Lazarus and brings him forth from the tomb where he is very much alive. The story that we just heard isn't as simple as that, for there are many details of the story that play key roles in the unfolding narrative.

There seems to be this sense of hopelessness in the story though. The sisters of Lazarus tell Jesus that if he had been there sooner then perhaps Lazarus would have still be alive. The sisters felt that their brothers death could have been prevented with the help of Jesus.

Can you imagine being in the position of Martha and Mary. How would you feel? How would you feel that if you believed that a certain person could have prevented death didn't show up when he was suppose to? How would you feel in the despair of this loss, when you felt that nothing had been done to save the one you love?

We've all had moments when we felt we have lost someone or something dear to us. We've had moments when we feel that if someone pushed harder or gave more of themselves then perhaps we would have been spared the pain and disappointment of loss.

This pain though, just doesn't apply to the loss of people. We can feel pain in the loss of organizations, schools, churches, and other groups in which we had a part in. We feel connected

to these groups and feel that we have an interest in them that goes beyond a casual interest. We care with our being in the loss of these institutions.

In my time at Faith Church, I have sensed a loss in this congregation. I have sensed a loss of something so dear that folks in this congregation are willing to rescue it with all of their power. It's a loss that many churches go through in this day and age and it is something that we don't have to despair in.

The loss I am referring to is simply the loss of younger folks and former members in the congregation. From my understanding at one time this congregation was full of families and full of people from all parts of Cheyenne. Over time through various events, some of this sparkle has been lost. Yet we don't have to despair in the loss.

When I think of the story of Lazarus, I think of many churches that I have come into contact with over time. I've heard stories of congregations that were on the brink of collapsing, yet through prayer and careful work they were brought back. One of these congregations sticks out in my mind in particular.

First United Methodist Church of Los Angeles, California, was at one time one of the largest Methodist congregations in the world. It was located in downtown Los Angeles and had a history that went back to the beginning of major settlement in the late 1800s and early 1900s. This is a congregation that had was moving forward. As Los Angeles grew, the congregation grew as well.

This congregation started many things that we know of today, even all the way out here in Wyoming. This congregation founded hospitals and organizations, one little institution in Los Angeles that is well known for its athletics and other famous people that have passed through.

That is the University of Southern California. It was founded by Los Angeles First and is one of the most well known institutions educational institutions in the world.

Yet this congregation has faced some devastating losses. After World War II, the membership of the congregation was well over 5,000 members. It was one of the largest churches in the west. Yet times changed in Los Angeles, and so did the people.

It use to be that Los Angeles had a significant cable car transportation system in the city that moved people from one place to another. Yet as the automobile took prominence, the cable car system was dismantled. Folks couldn't get to downtown like they used to. The congregation lost members rapidly to churches in the suburbs. In less than five years, membership had dropped to 1,000.

Los Angeles First also couldn't maintain their buildings, so they sold them and moved into smaller spaces. They kept doing this until recently, when they sold their last building about 10 years ago. Now this congregation doesn't have a permanent home. Instead, they meet in various places in downtown.

Last time I checked, the attendance for this congregation was around 100 or so a Sunday. Can you imagine the loss and pain this congregation feels? Can you imagine their memories of what they once where and now they are in the place where they barely have a home? They have a lot to be sad about. They have a lot to be angry about. Yet, this is not the end of their story.

Interest in this congregation is rising. This congregation is the last Protestant congregation in downtown Los Angeles. All of the other downtown churches have left, yet First has remained. Recognizing this, they see a great opportunity for the congregation.

In the last few years, the congregation has purchased some land in downtown Los Angeles, which if you think of land prices in California, that is nearly a miracle in itself. This congregation has begun a building project to build a new church in downtown Los Angeles.

They see themselves as an organization that can be the home for many outreach programs from other congregations or serve people in the downtown area. I have looked at their website and I have seen their plans for a new building. This is a congregation that is striving to be a modern day Lazarus and rising up out of the depths of despair.

We at Faith Church are fortunate enough that we have not had to experience such a drastic loss over time. We haven't had to sell our building off and move into a new place. We still have a place to call home. We have a building that is well taken care of and we are becoming stronger financially. We are beginning to see some hope for us.

Many times, almost nearly every Sunday I preach in some way of how we need to be ready to reach out into the community. I can see us doing that. I can see us being that congregation that reaches out to those who are in the despair of loss and need help in finding their way on this earth.

What does it take for us to take this congregation and rise up like Lazarus. Like I just mentioned, we are fortunate in some respects. We're not completely starting from scratch. Yet our focus needs to shift in one important way.

Instead of constantly looking at the past and remembering how times were good, we instead need to be focused on the future. Christ was a person who focused on the future and looked towards what lay ahead and not behind him. In the resurrection we see that Christ was looking for a better tomorrow and a stronger future.

Focusing on the past wouldn't help Lazarus. Mary and Martha looking at would could have happened wouldn't have brought Lazarus back. It took Jesus Christ to work his miracle to save Lazarus and bring him back from death. This right here is the clue on where we need to channel our energy.

I find that in order for us to rise up like Lazarus we need to focus our energy on Christ. Christ should be at the core of everything that we do. All of our educational programs, all of our outreach programs, all of our activities should be focused on spreading the gospel to all of those that we come into contact with.

What is important to keep in mind also is that just like Lazarus, Christ loves the church. Yes, perhaps you haven't thought about it this way, but because we are a part of the church of Jesus Christ then Jesus Christ himself loves this congregation. I believe in a Christ that wants to see us succeed in bring people closer to glory and closer to their creator God.

So today, I encourage you to look ahead to the future. Don't dwell in the past. Remember the past for what it was and remember all of the good times that we have experienced as a congregation. Yes, all churches are ready for 1953 to return, but here is the catch--1953 is not coming back. We can't live in the past and hope for that for doing nothing everything will just return. We can't live in the notion that simply because we are here that folks are going to come into our pews ready for us.

We have to keep pushing forward. We have to keep the focus on Christ. We have to keep the focus of our work in spreading the gospel. We need to be a church of the future and be prepared for the coming blessings that will spring forth if we begin to pray and work towards spreading the gospel.

Will all of this be easy? Will we be able to just change our attitudes and all of a sudden we are growing? It's going to take a lot of work. I don't have the answers for all of our questions, yet we need to come together and prepare for the resurrection. This is going to be a community effort. It's going to take us to step outside of our comfort zones. We need to be ready for the coming glory.

In all of this, remember the reason for why we do this. Christ lived and died for us so that we may have eternal life. We have been blessed with so much in our lives that it is important for us to spread the love of Christ to all that we encounter. Our blessings need to overflow and spill onto others so that they may experience the new life in Christ Jesus.

I'm ready to begin the journey with you. I'm ready to be Lazarus and rise up with you on our journey. We are going to do great things with prayer and focus on Christ. In this lenten season as we prepare for the coming hope, let us be prepared to share our blessings to all of the world. Amen.