

**Sunday, November 7, 2021**

**All Saints Sunday (Year B)**

John 11.32-44

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/893951017925152>

*(Sermon begins at about 26:15)*

### **“Unbound”**

Today’s Gospel reading, as we just heard, is about the raising of Lazarus. This is one of the significant stories in the Gospel according to John, containing some important teachings. Before we take a deep dive into this story, it would help to understand something about how John’s Gospel approaches Jesus’ teachings. When we think of Jesus teaching, we naturally think of parables. That was the primary means that Jesus used for instruction. But the parables are virtually all contained in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Not John. John uses a different approach to convey Jesus’ key teachings. As one commentator notes, “In John it’s as though Jesus shapes events around him into living, breathing parables, ‘signs’ through which larger realities can be glimpsed.”<sup>1</sup> Rather than call them miracles, John refers to these events as “signs.” John’s Gospel is organized around seven such “signs.” Events and encounters that reveal Jesus’ identity and mission in profound and striking ways. Think of these as road signs, pointing to bigger and deeper realities about who Jesus is. The first sign is the well-known story of Jesus changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana, serving as the introduction to his public ministry. And we go through until we hit number seven: the raising of Lazarus. The final sign before Jesus’ death and resurrection.

The seventh sign, the raising of Lazarus, is actually a much longer story than what we heard in today’s Gospel reading. What we heard today is the ending, the most critical part: the raising itself. Again, it helps to understand how we got here and to highlight some of the salient points. Jesus had previously been in Jerusalem, where he succeeded in upsetting a group of Jews by equating himself to God. To the point that they tried to stone him for blasphemy. So, he fled across the Jordan, leaving Judea. While away, Jesus received word that his dear friend Lazarus was ill. A couple of days later, Jesus informs the disciples that they need to return to Judea. They think this is a bad idea, that returning would be a suicide mission. After all, the Jews had just been trying to kill him. That is when Jesus informs them that Lazarus is dead, and they need to go to Bethany where Lazarus lived with his sisters Mary and Martha. Upon reaching Bethany, Jesus has an encounter with Martha which foreshadows what this whole trip is about:

“Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’” (Jn 11.21-26).

To this point in John's Gospel, Jesus has made some references to eternal life, but has not connected eternal life to who he is. He has foretold his death once (Jn 8.21-30), but what he says is pretty cryptic and does not really give any indication of what his death will mean. Nothing about resurrection—his or ours. So, this encounter with Martha and the discussion of resurrection is significant. As they talk about Lazarus rising again, Martha naturally thinks Jesus is referring to the general resurrection of all the faithful at the end of the ages. A common belief among many Jews at the time (although not the Sadducees). But it is clear from Jesus' response to Martha that when he talks about resurrection, he has something else in mind, something more specific. "I am the resurrection and the life." That he is the source of resurrection. His comment foreshadows what is to come. For Lazarus, for Jesus, and for us. Although, at this point in the Gospel, that is still not clear. Despite the ambiguity, Martha has faith. When Jesus asks her if she believes that he is the resurrection and the life, she responds, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (Jn 11.27).

We move on to an encounter with Jesus and Mary, as recorded in today's Gospel reading. We are told that Jesus "was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (Jn 11.33). This observation is often misunderstood. It is often sentimentalized, and when paired with the fact that Jesus wept, interpreted as Jesus being overcome with sorrow and grief at the loss his friend. Yet, the original Greek verbs translated as "disturbed" and "moved" were usually used to communicate agitation and indignation. While Jesus would certainly have been saddened at the death of a dear friend, in reality his being disturbed and moved, him being agitated and indignant, probably had more to do with what Lazarus' death represented. That the death of Lazarus and the accompanying displays of grief and mourning "highlight the bitter cost and power of death in human lives and so underscore the significance of Jesus' ultimate victory over death."<sup>2</sup>

What specifically caused Jesus' agitation and indignation is hard to say. Perhaps it was just the poignant reminder of the fragility of human life and confirmation of what happens to each of us when our time on this earth is through. Or maybe it was the realization of what he would have to go through to reverse this eventuality. What he would have to go through personally to bring about an end to the finality of death and to allow for the resurrection of all God's beloved children. While we cannot know for sure what was in Jesus' mind and heart at that moment, his strong reaction points to the weightiness, to the significance of what comes next: the actual raising of Lazarus.

Jesus commands that the tomb be opened. The whole idea seems pointless to the bystanders. Martha notes, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days" (Jn 11.39b). "The time span is telling: a traditional belief in those days was that the soul lingered around the body for three days after death; by the fourth day, it was thought, the soul had left the corpse behind for good."<sup>3</sup> Of course, Jesus knew that was not an issue for God. The whole flow of the story of the raising of Lazarus serves to masterfully call attention to what God accomplishes through Jesus and to the glory of God revealed through this seventh and final sign. After praying to God, making clear that it is not himself but God who was performing this sign, Jesus "cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'" (Jn 11.43). Lazarus emerges from the tomb, bound in the strips of cloth his dead body had been wrapped in preparation for burial.

Of course, this side of the Resurrection, we can see just how this seventh sign, while a significant and miraculous event in and of itself, was merely a foreshadowing of what was to come. The encounter between Jesus and Martha, where he tells her “I am the resurrection and the life” being a hint as to what Jesus would do in the raising of Lazarus. That Lazarus would be resurrected to new life. Although, strictly speaking, Lazarus was not resurrected. In the event recorded in John’s Gospel, he was merely resuscitated. He would eventually die, as we all do. Although, by then, the way would be prepared for resurrection.

Even more so, Jesus’ words, “I am the resurrection and the life” is an indication of what would happen to Jesus himself. With the subsequent raising of Lazarus being a further visual clue—although a pale comparison—of what Jesus was ultimately talking about. His resurrection and what flows from that. Not just that he would be resurrected following his own death. But even more so, that his resurrection would be the cause for, would result in, the absolute and final destruction of sin and death. That the defeat of sin and death would prepare the way and allow for the resurrection of all God’s beloved children. For the resurrection of all the saints. Resurrection leading to and making possible new and eternal life for all the saints. That is what we celebrate this All Saints’ Sunday. That through Jesus’ death and resurrection, he prepared the way for all of us to be resurrected to new and eternal life with him. And on this day, we remember all those saints who have gone before us into eternal life.

As I noted, the death and raising of Lazarus is meant to be a foreshadowing of Jesus’ own death and resurrection. In a bit of a twist of fate, the raising of Lazarus proved to be the catalyst for the Temple authorities resolving once and for all to put Jesus to death.

There is one other piece of this story that is worth pondering, particularly in light of our use of this sign for All Saints’ Sunday. Jesus’ instructions to the bystanders upon Lazarus emerging from the tomb were “Unbind him, and let him go” (Jn 11.44b). These words have a deeply significant meaning. They were not just an instruction to remove Lazarus’ burial cloths. Jesus was also giving us a promise. That through the events of the raising of Lazarus, leading to Jesus’ arrest, death, and resurrection, which in turn leads to our own resurrection, we are unbound from the bonds of death. Our own death and the deaths of our loved ones. While the dying process can be scary, we nonetheless have assurance from our Lord that we do not need to be afraid of what comes after. He has already taken care of that for us. We can be unbound from those fears and worries and are set free to go about living our lives in the assurance that when our time on this earth is through, we will spend eternity in the presence of the one who promised “I am the resurrection and the life.” And we will be reunited with all the saints. With all our loved ones who have gone before.

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<sup>1</sup> “Lazarus, Come Out!” SALT’s Commentary for All Saints’ Day,” SALT, October 24, 2021.

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2021/10/24/lazarus-come-out-salts-commentary-for-all-saintss-day>.

<sup>2</sup> *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1931.

<sup>3</sup> “Lazarus, Come Out!”