

The Worst Sermon I Ever Preached

It was "The Worst Sermon I Ever Preached." The text was John 11:1-45—the Raising of Lazarus.

In the summer of 1969 I was serving a student parish in Waynoka, Oklahoma. [Remember how to get there? Go to the end of the world and turn left.] It was a dismal, dusty little town. It once had been a thriving town, population almost 5,000. Its two primary industries had been an ice-house that employed about 200 people, and a railroad roundhouse facility that employed 800.

In 1961, the Santa Fe installed mechanical refrigeration units in all its beef cars, and there was no more need to re-ice the cars in Waynoka. 200 jobs were terminated without notice. Three years later the Santa Fe moved its roundhouse facility to Wichita Falls, Texas, taking most of the 800 jobs with them.

I arrived in August 1968 to a dusty little town—population almost 1,100. The church averaged 33 in attendance on Sunday morning, and had not had a full-time minister in several years.

I had a Southern Baptist background, so a first priority was to learn how Disciples "do things". Well, a little math would have helped: eight committees, elders, deacons, four children and youth Sunday School classes and two adult classes. Add CWF, Youth sponsors, board officers and divide by average attendance of 33. But I was having trouble understanding why things weren't running smoothly!

In the summer of '69 we elected new officers, and I set up appointments with each of the new committee chairs to discuss plans for the coming year. On the first Saturday, all three committee chairs forgot the meetings.

I was devastated! Saturday afternoon, I tried to work on a sermon, but disappointment and frustration distracted me. Finally, late in the day, I was flipping through the Bible, and my eye caught this story in John 11: "The Raising of Lazarus".

Now my awareness of God's presence and the presence of the Holy Spirit generally has been in retrospect, like Jacob's, when he awoke from his dream at the River Jabok: "*Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not.*" (GENESIS 28:16) But on that Saturday in the Summer of '69, as I scribbled out a few notes on a legal pad, I was aware of a presence.

Sunday I stood in the pulpit and told about the forgotten meetings. I didn't name names; but with only 33 in attendance...

Then I read the text from John 11. The sermon had four points: (1) v. 14: "Lazarus is dead." As I addressed the congregation on Sunday, I read from Webster's Dictionary the definition of "dead":

"Manifesting or marked by absence of sensation, consciousness, etc.; Being without feeling, spirit, vitality, etc.; completely ineffective or ineffectual; extinct; extinguished; disused; dull; tame; quiet; deprived or devoid of significance; unproductive; unprofitable; barren; sterile."

And then I said, "That definition fits this church. This church is dead!" [Hey! I was young and stupid!]

(2) vs. 21: "Martha said to Jesus, 'If you had been here, my brother would not

have died." Application: If Jesus had been here, this church would not have died.

(3) vs. 39: [You have to read this one in the King James Version, or it loses something in the translation]: *'Jesus said, 'Take ye away the stone.' Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, 'Lord, by now he stinketh; for he hath been dead for four days!'*" Application: [are you ready for this?] "How long does it take a dead church to start stinking?" And I named four "stenches" in the nostrils of God: apathy, . . .

(4) vs. 43: "Lazarus, Come forth!"

Early the next morning I left town, bond for Seattle, Washington and my first General Assembly. When I returned, two elders and the Chairman of the Board came to my office on Saturday morning. I assumed I was being fired.

It probably was the worst sermon ever preached in the history of the church! But the Board Chairman said, "Your last sermon touched a lot of people. We've talked with most of the active members of the church, we sense a lot of recommitment. Your leadership is the strongest this church has had in a long time."

That was when I knew that the Holy Spirit is real. I have re-read that sermon many times. It's bad beyond description. And if the Holy Spirit can work through something like that, there are no limits to what the Spirit can do.

I've not done much with that passage since then—avoided it, I guess. I was here three years ago when it came up in the lectionary and Donna preached from it. She reminded me that the text is not about death at all. It's about life.

In the introduction to his Gospel, John says "In the beginning was the Word." And of that Word, John says, "In him was life, and that life was the light of men."

Raymond Brown, whom I consider the foremost authority on John, says John's Gospel develops this theme through seven miracles or "signs"—from the Wedding at Cana, where Jesus turns water into wine, to the raising of Lazarus. Each story demonstrates how Jesus is the "Word" in whom humanity has life and light.

You recall the story: word reached Jesus that his dear friend, Lazarus, was critically ill. He waited two days before starting toward Lazarus' home. Before he got there, he got word that his friend had died. We take up the story in verse 20:

<p><i>When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. ²¹'Lord,' Martha said to Jesus, 'if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.' ²³Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' ²⁴Martha answered, 'I know he will rise again in the resurrection at</i></p>	<p><i>the last day.' ²⁵Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' ²⁷'Yes, Lord,' she told him, 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.'</i></p>
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This is the whole point of John's Gospel: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world. And in him is life. Martha said, *"I know that my brother will live again in the resurrection at the last day."* But Jesus says, *"This is the last day! I am—present tense; here; now—I am!"*

In John 4 Jesus encountered a woman at a well, who said, "We know that Messiah **will come**." And Jesus replied, "Woman, **I am**." All that is promised by God, all prophecy, all hope, all expectation is fulfilled—accomplished—in Jesus. Fittingly, it is

in John that Jesus' final word on the cross is, "It is finished."

"In Him was Life..." ...but not just any life!

A dusty little town... a sleepy little church... dead. A student pastor—young and foolish—preaches the worst sermon imaginable; and where there was death, there's life. New Life. When we left there two-and-a-half years later the average attendance was 82. We had scrapped the seven-committee structure and had three well-functioning committees that guided the work of the church. Where there was death; there was life.

I know: it's not the same thing. Or is it?

"In Him was life." Twenty years ago, the story of 7-year-old Nicholas Green made headlines around the world. Nicholas and his family were traveling in Italy when some robbers mistook their vehicle for a jewelry delivery car and fired on it. The rest of the family was uninjured, but Nicholas was severely wounded.

After the boy was declared brain-dead, his parents announced they would donate Nicholas' organs and corneas to Italians who needed them.

That decision triggered an outpouring of emotion and publicity in Italy, where organ donation rates, which had been abysmally low, soared and made the Greens famous. A TV movie, *Nicholas' Gift*, was made. The experience, detailed in Green's book *The Nicholas Effect*, marked the beginning of his crusade to persuade others to donate, one that has brought new life to desperately ill patients and their families around the world. Where there was death; there is life.

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"In Him was life." In two weeks Christians around the world will gather to celebrate Resurrection. Resurrection only begins with Jesus being raised from the dead. There's more! Paul wrote to the church in Corinth and said, "*But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that sleep:*" the First fruits. Resurrection only *begins* that first Easter morning! It's more than a single event: it changes human existence! It becomes a way of living—a way of looking at life and seeing what others can't see—seeing life, where others see death; seeing possibility, where others see despair. It's why the church makes such a response after hurricanes and earthquakes and tornados and Tsunamis and famine.

I know: it's not the same thing. Or is it?

"In Him **IS** life." In Him is the power to make new, to restore, to rebuild. Jesus makes a difference! "Martha," Jesus says, "I am the Resurrection and the life. Do we believe it?"