

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

God's Call to Life Fifth Sunday of Lent March 28, 2004 7:30 p.m. Vigil
Reading from A Cycle Ez 37:12-14; Rom 8:8-11; **Jn 11:1-45** Joliet Catholic
Charismatic Retreat Carmelite Spiritual Center (Lazarus)

“Lazarus, come out!”

It surely takes some reflection to explain and understand what this gospel story is about. Most people don't bother; they just regard it as an example of Jesus' power, his miraculous power to raise the dead. Here is somebody dead four days; now he is out of the tomb. Isn't that wonderful! Well, if you were Lazarus, you might not think so. After all, **life on earth is necessarily terminal. Resuscitating a corpse of its nature is only temporary.** Do you want to die twice?

I knew a man—he is dead now—but he died four times. The fourth time was the only final time. The first three times he kept coming back to life. Well, he was in the hospital when he died, and the doctors resuscitated him. The first time he had a terrible, awful, miserable, frightening experience of darkness and horror; and when he came back into his body he got religion—fast. He had not been in church in years. He had not prayed in years. He had not concerned himself with anything, but now he did.

Then he had another experience: he died again. He had a bad heart. They declared him dead; but then they decided to try the paddles, and they brought him back. Well, the second time he had a very different experience. It was so beautiful. It was so wonderful. And when he came back he talked about this. And he evangelized many people. He told them how beautiful it was to die. But he told them about the first time, too.

Well, then it happened a third time; and that's when I met him. That's back when I first met Tom. I was in Westmont, and I visited Tom's prayer meeting over in Western Springs. And I didn't know the rest of you at that time. Well, the third time it was beyond description. I mean, the first time he described beautiful music and light and everything. The third time he couldn't describe it. He said that it was so fabulous; it was so wonderful. Then when they revived him he was actually angry! He said to the doctors, “Don't you ever do that again! I want to go back there!”

So it is possible to come back from death—it is possible, but is it a blessing? Only in certain cases when there is something undone, when something isn't finished, when you need to do something or when you need reconciliation or something like that. Then it's a blessing; otherwise it's no blessing. I mean, I really experienced his pain in living on this planet after his third brush with death that was so beautiful and marvelous.

Now there are literally volumes of examples of these types of experiences. **People do come back from death**—not after four days normally, but they do come back from death. The point is this: **who benefits from this? In some cases, as I said, with unfinished agenda the person does.** Other than that maybe there is some other reason. But sometimes it's really not a favor at all to the person who comes back. It may be a

favor to the family. Maybe Martha and Mary were really happy to see Lazarus again. We can understand that. There was the case of Jesus raising a lad who was the only son of a widowed mother. I bet she was happy. But the point is **being resuscitated is not anything permanent because as long as we are living on this planet we have to die**; we have to leave. And we have to keep that in mind when we read this story. John knew that, of course—the evangelist.

Why did John give us the story. He is the only one who did. No other evangelist tells us about Lazarus. I think he had quite a few reasons. But, of course, **we have to read John in the context of his Book of Signs**: water into wine at Cana, the Woman at the Well in Samaria, the Man Blind from Birth in Judea. Now very close to Jerusalem Lazarus brought back from the tomb.

Jesus once said, “Let the dead bury the dead.” And some people think this is rather a harsh statement. I’m not so sure. Walking and talking and eating and drinking is/are not the same thing as living—not from the standpoint of the gospel, anyway! **Being alive in the gospel means to be full of—what? God’s life.** That’s what it means to be alive, eternal life! That’s what life is. **The only real life is eternal life.** The only real being is God. **To be full of God’s life means to experience God’s presence**—the living water, to receive help in answer to our prayers. It means to **discover food, the food of doing God’s will that nourishes us.** It means **working out our salvation with faith and hope and love.** To live without this is not really living; it’s just subsisting in a living death.

In Christ there is the power and the potential for even the dead to live. There is no case that Jesus cannot handle. There is no extreme beyond the reach of his power. There is no disease: mental, emotional, physical, spiritual—no matter what cause: biological, viral, genetic, demonic—it doesn’t matter! **There is nothing Jesus does not have the power to heal.** And ultimately death itself is not anything that can keep us from the power of the One who is the resurrection. That’s what he told Martha: “I am the resurrection.” And don’t forget “I am” doesn’t mean “Jesus is.” **“I AM” is God’s name.** When Jesus says that he is speaking in his Godhead; he is speaking from his deity. **“I AM the resurrection and the life.”**

The story of Lazarus is written really not about Lazarus anymore than the story about the Woman at the Well was about the woman, or the story about the Man Born Blind was about the man. These are **dramas that exemplify the ministry and the mission of Christ.** He gathers even those estranged from God into unity and communion and offers them an experience of God. **He heals all defects except those that are willful.** And I recall to your mind the statement he made, “If you were blind, there would be no sin in that, but because you say, ‘We can see,’ your sin remains.” God can do all things, but **God cannot violate the freedom he has given us.** It is not his will to do so. He will not overcome our freedom to save us against our will. **We do have to own our own eyes.**

In this story he brings to life all that seems to be dead because **the only true death is loss of faith in God.** That’s what death really is. That’s what leads to separation. That’s what leads to disjunction. That’s what cuts us off.

The gospel action in today's story and this message gives all believers an opportunity to reflect on our own lives:

- **Where am I dead inside?—Where am I dead?**
- **What in me needs God's love and attention?**
- **How have I become all bound up and tied like Lazarus to negative expectations of other people or even myself?**

Jesus states in this gospel—not today's reading, but the gospel of John—"I have come that you may have life, and may have it in abundance." And Christians are very sorely tempted to measure abundance in terms of what the world calls abundance. This is a terrible mistake. It's actually a self-fulfilling prophecy of doom. We cannot accept the world's standards if we expect more than the world can give us. And **in faith we do expect more than the world can give us, so we can't judge things by the world.** In hope we do await more than the world can promise, so we cannot judge by the world's standards or timetable. In love we do have what the world has not. How self-defeating to judge ourselves by the world's standards!

Christ brings a new way, a new truth, and a new life. Gradually God can reclaim all that is lost within us. **God can restore all that has been wasted and bring to life what has died.**

"Lazarus, come out!"