



FIRST (SCOTS)SERMONS

“The Power of Presence”

Scripture Lessons: *Psalm 130; John 11: 32-34*

***This sermon was preached by The Rev. Tracey W. Daniel on
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First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina

Psalm 130 A Song of Ascents

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,

So that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord

more than those who watch for the morning,

more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord!

For with the Lord there is steadfast love,

and with him is great power to redeem.

It is he who will redeem Israel

from all its iniquities.

Read John 11:32-44

³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus

looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.”

Let us pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock, and Redeemer. Amen.

Dan and I enjoy taking walks together. On one of our regular walking routes, we have watched the transformation of an old home. For the first two years when we walked by this house, I would look at the home and wonder: What’s the story there? Why are there old cars parked in the yard? Do those cars ever move? Is someone living in there?

The yard was unkept. Large vines were growing up the side of the house. The trim on the house needed a paint job.

Early this year, a For Sale sign was placed in the yard.

The next month there was a large construction trash container placed where the old cars had been.

Next the yard had a huge pile of dirt by the front door.

Soon the weeds were pulled up, the vines growing up the side of the house were cut down and the window replaced.

Wow! What a difference.

The house doesn’t look anything like it did six months earlier. It has been transformed!

I am sure you have seen similar transformations around Charleston.

Today’s gospel lesson is about a transformation, but really it is more than a transformation story – it is a resurrection story.

The one who was dead is brought back to life.

John uses the word “life” more than any other gospel. He uses this word 47 times. Three times more often than in Matthew and Luke – and five times more often than in Mark.

The Gospel of John wants us to know that in Jesus there is life. He finds 47 ways to use the Greek word **zōē** for life to help us understand.

Other people might be alive – but only those whose lives are filled with Christ experience abundant life – the kind of life God desires for all of us.

In the Gospel of John our access to abundant life is not delayed until the end of the age but it is available today through Jesus. **The story of raising Lazarus from the dead points to this truth.**

Lazarus has been dead for four days. Four days is a significant amount of time. In the Jewish tradition of that day, it was believed that by the third day the soul has left the body – so after four days in a tomb, everyone would have known that Lazarus was truly dead. The fact that Jesus delayed his coming would have terrible consequences for Lazarus – or so they all thought.

Our New Testament reading for today began in the middle of the story. So, let's take a minute to go back to the beginning, starting with verse one of John, Chapter 11.

Lazarus is very ill. Mary, Martha, and their brother, Lazarus are close friends of Jesus. So, the sisters send a message to Jesus saying, **"The one you love is ill."** But Jesus' response to their situation seems surprisingly nonchalant.

"Though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was." (John 11:5-6)

If Jesus loves Lazarus so much, why did he wait so long to go to Bethany?

There could have been several reasons.

- One of which is that the disciples would have likely discouraged Jesus for heading back toward Jerusalem. The people in Jerusalem had already threatened to harm Jesus. I can imagine that the disciples were fearful for Jesus and for their own lives.
- Another reason was that Jesus wanted to be sure "the glory of God" was recognized in this situation. Again, if Lazarus were truly dead – in the tomb for a longer period of time – more than three days – a true miracle would occur if he were raised from the dead.
- And a third reason Jesus waited was because this showed that he followed the commands of God. And he stayed where he was until he had done the work that God called him to do. Jesus does not follow the demands of his disciples or his dear friends. Jesus' follows only God's commands.

The sisters must have been devastated that Jesus did not come right away. I can imagine they were angry at Jesus for taking so long to come.

Can you relate to the sisters as they cry, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died?" (John 11:21, 32)

Lord, if you had been here ...

Implied in this statement are some pointed questions, perhaps even accusations.

Where were you, Jesus?

Why did you take so long getting here?

I thought you loved my brother. I thought you cared about us.

Aren't these the kinds of questions we would have wanted to ask?

When Jesus hears the accusations implied by these questions, he doesn't scold Martha or Mary or their friends for what they say. To Martha, he responds with a promise: "Your brother will rise again." (John 11:23)

After Martha confirms her belief in the resurrection on the last day, Jesus then responds with another promise: "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life (zōē). Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.'" (John 11:25)

Jesus is promising resurrection to all who believe – **resurrection that is available today** – "new life" **now ...**

Jesus pulls the hope of the future resurrection into the present, promising abundant, eternal life that begins here and now ...

Jesus is fully present with the sisters, and he feels their grief.

"When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly enraged and deeply moved." (John 11:33)

And after asking where Lazarus is laid, **Jesus himself begins to weep. (John 11:34-35)**

Christ weeps, understands our pain, our sorrow, our disappointment, and our fear.

We can learn by Jesus' actions that he is with ***all those who are grieving*** in their pain and loss.

- 1- He can relate to all our emotions.
- 2- He gives us permission to weep and feel anger when life disappoints us.
- 3- God is with us in every situation, and we can share with God our deepest hurts.
- 4- There is nothing that can separate us from God's love – not even death.

Jesus' life is an example for us to follow.

We can minister to one another by our presence.

When there is sadness or tragedy or loss, we can weep with our friends.

We can show up in silence and just be there.

I remember a friend saying, "The sweetest words I heard after the accident were from my friend who said, "I am on my way, too, I am on my way."

The power of presence.

Many times, in this life we cannot repair what is broken, but in our presence, Christ's love is felt.

When you are present

at the hospital

at the funeral

or at the rehab center

Your presence is a concrete reminder that God is with us.

Again, this is the power of presence.

When Jesus comes to Lazarus' tomb, he says "Take away the stone."

Martha is alarmed.

Even though she had boldly professed to Jesus when he arrived, "Even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him," *she is not so confident now that Jesus knows what he is doing.*

Does Jesus *really* understand that Lazarus is dead, and that he has been in the tomb for four days?

Surely, Lazarus' body has begun to decompose by now, and it is starting to smell bad.

Jesus continues with his work.

When the heavy stone is moved away, Jesus cries, "Lazarus, Come Out!" (John 11:43)

Obediently, Lazarus comes out, stumbling with his grave clothes still wrapped around his face and body.

Jesus calls each of us by name too. And he calls us to "Come out of our Tombs" – Tombs that keep us from living abundant life now.

Jesus calls – Come out of your tomb of

- Depression
- Fear
- Addiction
- Insecurity
- Anger
- Resentment
- Arrogance

- Guilt
- Hurt
- Whatever it is that separates you from living your full life now in Christ.

This story of Lazarus' resurrection; this story of transformation in his life – is here to teach us that what we think is beyond repair, is a lost possibility, is the end of the story, or is even death.

Jesus offers us transformation through the power of his presence in our lives.

Jesus reminds us that with God all things are possible.

After Lazarus comes out of the tomb Jesus tells his friends to “Unbind him and let him go.” (John 11:44)

Who is Jesus asking you to unbind? Is there a place you need to offer the first apology? Is there an old hurt that needs to be let go? Are you holding on to someone you need to set free?

Unbind him, unbind her, and let go.

Where do you see God calling for transformation in your life?

Where do you see a need for resurrection?

How will the power of Christ's presence in your life make a difference?

On our walk last night, we passed by that old house again. The For Sale sign is no longer in the front yard. In its place there is a new sign. It is in the shape of a Stork. The stork is carrying a bundle wrapped in a pink bow. It is announcing the birth of a new baby girl.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.