FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

"GRACE THAT LEADS US HOME"

Scripture Lesson: John 11: 1-45

This sermon was preached by Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, March 22, 2026 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

John 11: 1-45

The Death of Lazarus

1 *Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.* 2 *Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.* 3 *So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."* 4 *But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather, it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."* 5 *Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus,* 6 *after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*

7 *Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."* 8 *The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?"* 9 *Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble because they see the light of this world.* 10 *But those who walk at night stumble because the light is not in them."* 11 *After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him."* 12 *The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right."* 13 *Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep.* 14 *Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead.* 15 *For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."* 16 *Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."*

Jesus the Resurrection and the Life

17 *When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.* 18 *Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away,* 19 *and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother.* 20 *When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.* 21 *Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.* 22 *But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."* 23 *Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."* 24 *Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."* 25 *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,* 26 *and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"* 27 *She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."*

Jesus Weeps

28 *When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you."* 29 *And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.* 30 *Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him.* 31 *The Jews who were with her in the house consoling her saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there.* 32 *When 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."* 33 *When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.* 34 *He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see."* 35 *Jesus began to weep.* 36 *So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"* 37 *But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"*

Jesus Raises Lazarus to Life

38 *Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.* 39 *Jesus 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."* 40 *Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"* 41 *So 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."* 43 *When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"* 44 *The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."*

The Plot to Kill Jesus

45 *Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did believed in him.*

Grace That Leads Us Home

Leader: The word of the Lord.
People: Thanks be to God.

Imagine, for a moment, this sanctuary as a boat. And from bow to stern, from front to back, it's a little longer or shorter than the church building depending upon which estimates you're looking at by about as wide as the middle point of the center pews. Now, lower the ceiling of the hold to four or five feet high. And then, fill it. Not with pews but with people. Hundreds of men, women, and children would have been packed into one of those old 18th century slave ships captained by John Newton and others.

Now, we know that eventually John Newton's life would be transformed and he would attribute it to God's grace. He would write in one of his many hymns, "Sovereign grace has power alone to subdue a heart of stone; and the moment grace is felt, then the hardest heart will melt." The scriptures remind us that, apart from God's grace, in our case it is as if we are in one of those old slave ships shackled not with claims but by sin.

This morning, we will consider that aspect of grace which has to do with the wonderful and amazing and providential care of God, which can reach into a life like Newton's, or any of our lives for that matter, and can lead us in a new direction. We find that kind of grace at work in our Old Testament lesson this morning. In Ezekiel 37, the prophet is led into a valley filled with bones, dry bones. They are scattered all over the ground, bleached by the sun, like sand dollars on a windowsill.

The historical backdrop makes that image even more stark. In the year 586 BC, Jerusalem was obliterated by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. The temple was destroyed and many Israelites were carried into exile. So, for Ezekiel, this valley of dry bones was an image of utter desolation: a world without hope, a feeling of forsakenness, a future that had been lost to God's people. But God asks Ezekiel a startling question: "Son of man, can these bones live?" Ezekiel answers honestly, "O Lord God, you know." Then God commands him to speak to the bones and slowly, miraculously, the bones begin to rattle, and flesh appears, and breath fills them with life.

Such life-giving grace echoes throughout the Gospels as well, and here in John 11, we see grace at work in the story of Lazarus. Lazarus was dead in the tomb, and by every religious and cultural standard, there was no hope. Lazarus' sisters were grieving and they were disappointed that Jesus did not come sooner. Nevertheless, just as God had revived those dry bones in Ezekiel's vision, Jesus would bring about life in this situation. It is interesting to note that in both stories, life comes not from human effort, but from none other

than the will of God. The case of Lazarus, grace and life enter a graveyard of all places, a location where death seemed absolute.

When we look closer at John 11, we realize there's a great deal more to learn about how God's grace is operative in our life and in the life of the world. We know from the outset that Lazarus was sick. His sisters, Mary and Martha, sent word to Jesus: "Lord, the one you love is ill."

John tells us plainly that Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, and yet, Jesus waited. He remained where he was for two more days and by the time he did arrive in Bethany, Lazarus has been dead for four days. This delay troubled Mary and Martha, and both sisters said virtually the same thing when they saw Jesus again: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." They clearly believed that Jesus could have done something, but, alas, he wasn't there to do it.

Now, earlier in the chapter, Jesus had explained the reason for the delay. He said that Lazarus' illness would serve the glory of God, which introduces an important truth about grace. Grace does not always operate Jesus had explained the reason for the delay. He said that Lazarus' illness would serve the glory of God, which introduces an important truth about grace. Grace does not always operate on our timetable. We sometimes assume that grace means immediate relief, immediate clarity, immediate rescue. But sometimes grace waits. Sometimes grace unfolds slowly. There will always be something we cannot fully explain, something that remains just beyond our grasp. We cannot always tell how God's purposes unfold, or why grace takes the path it does. We only know that, in time, it does.

We would do well to remember that in the story of the man born blind from John 9, which we read last week, grace operated in a similar way. What I mean is when Jesus healed that man, the man did not immediately have a full understanding of who Jesus was. Only later, and after being cast out by the religious authorities, only then did Jesus seek him out in the marketplace and reveal himself more fully.

Faith is often a journey, and to be certain, no one has their life of faith completely figured out. Here in Charleston, we know something about maintaining and sometimes restoring old properties, old homes. I've talked with enough people to know what often happens. A restoration project begins and, on the surface, everything seems straight forward. But once the work begins, some wood rot is found underneath the floorboards. And what was supposed to be a quick repair turns into months of work. Removing what was damaged, reinforcing what remained, rebuilding what no one ever sees. I can see some of you beginning to twitch. At the time it felt like nothing but a delay, like nothing was happening. But in truth, a lot of important work was being done. Grace often works like that. Not always quickly, not always visually, but faithfully and ultimately thoroughly.

Amidst real doubt and hopelessness, Jesus responded to Martha with one of the most profound declarations in all of Scripture: "I am the resurrection and the life."

Shortly thereafter we are told that Jesus wept. We don't sit with those words very often, but they serve as a wonderful reminder that the One who will raise Lazarus from the dead, that he himself grieves. In this way, Jesus teaches us something else about grace. Grace does not rush past human sorrow. On the contrary, grace enters it. Part of the reason Jesus weeps is because he misses his dear friend, but there is also a deeper theological reason. As the son of God stood before that tomb, he was confronting the consequences of death that sin had brought into the world.

We soon come to that moment we've all been waiting for. Jesus gave a simple command: "Take away the stone."

Martha objects: "Lord, there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." Isn't the bible wonderfully honest about the practical matters of life and death. Jesus' command is obeyed and the stone is removed, and Jesus cries out with a loud voice: "Lazarus, come out!" And lo and behold, Lazarus who had been dead, he walked out of the tomb, still wrapped in burial cloths.

I once heard a preacher say that it was a good thing Jesus called Lazarus by name, because if he had simply shouted, "come out," the whole cemetery might have come walking out in their grave clothes. That's what grace can do, it can awaken the dead. It can bring forth life and newness of life.

Returning for a moment to John Newton. We need to know that his conversion did not make him perfect. One often overlooked, and perhaps difficult to grasp aspect of Newton's life was that, even after a transformational moment at sea in 1748, Newton was a slave trader for several years thereafter and he would also go on to write that classic hymn Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound. Which is to say that sometimes grace takes time, painful time. For Newton, he did eventually leave the trade and became a pastor in England, and, in time, he emerged as a strong voice for the abolition of slavery. Yet still the process unfolded gradually, which tells us that grace does not simply touch us once, grace continually leads us.

In the Reformed tradition we often speak about this process of sanctification in at least one of two ways: first, once we are united with Christ, there is a decisive impact upon the way that sin operates in our lives; and second, God's Spirit is continually about the business of melting and molding us, shaping us into the image of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

In other words, our Christian life is a journey. Near the end of Newton's own journey, he said this: "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior." Sometimes the deepest theology can be found in the simplest of statements.

Next Sunday, Palm Sunday, we will begin following Jesus to the cross, to his own tomb, to his resurrection. But for now, we remain in this final week of Lent for just a little bit longer. The themes of grace that we have explored together throughout this season have been about how grace sustains us, and frees us, and exposes us, and seeks us. And now, how that grace leads us home.

We won't always get it right, and our faith may grow slowly. In fact, we may spend years upon years learning what grace truly means. But the good news of the gospel is that our journey of faith does not ultimately depend on us. It depends on the One who stood outside Lazarus' tomb and called him by name, the One who calls us by name. Praise be to God that, in the power of God's grace, a valley of dry bones can breathe, a man can walk out of a grave, and a slave trader can become a pastor.

John Newton's story intersects with our own, in that 18th century Charleston was one of the ports for the transatlantic slave trade and ships like Newton's arrived at our shores as well. We can't imagine being in a ship like that, crowded, dark, bound by chains. It makes Jesus' final words in this morning's New Testament lesson that much more resonant: "Unbind him and let him go!"

That, dear friends, is what the church is called to do as well. To bear witness, in every good way, to God's amazing Grace which leads us out of the darkness and into the light. That very grace, which, one day, will lead us home.

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