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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/10/2011, The Fifth Sunday in Lent
John 11:1-45

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is from the beginning of our Gospel story. As I read it aloud, notice how peacefully Jesus speaks of the death of his friend Lazarus:

...then [Jesus] said to [his disciples], “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awake him out of sleep.” ¹²The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” ¹³Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead...” (John 11:11-14, RSV)

Sometimes it happens to people of good will that they do something quite remarkable, but without a whole lot of comment or bragging. They do something great as if it were effortless, but in reality it was hard and cost them. If you stop to think about it, you yourself might have done something like that during the course of your life. Or you might soon do such a good thing. It will be a deed that combines sacrifice with grace. The good deed gets quietly done, and no one really knows the effort or the cost that went into it.

Parents do that sort of thing, often without even being aware of it. Young parents often look haggard, and they come by that look honestly, because they have been working harder than they might ever have worked before. But they are hardly conscious of their work because it is borne along by such love for their children.

Likewise, on the battlefield, soldiers can dash into danger, not because they are reckless or like danger, but because the lives of fellow soldiers are on the line. A calm calculation of odds would lead them to stay put, but love presses them forward.

The fireman can rush into the burning home, the EMS workers can dash into the tottering building, and the policeperson can knock on the door of the apartment with the shouts of domestic violence within. All of it is dangerous, yet the person steps ahead and does the good deed.

Indeed, I do not see how our city or society in general could function if people of good will were not continually doing the hard deed without much fuss. There is so very much background work that goes into any good enterprise. You see, for example, those high light fixtures, up yonder in our church nave. From time to time, those lights go out. Then Chris and Ricardo get out the tall ladder and one of them braces the ladder and the other one climbs up there to change the bulb. I could not do it. I

have lost my nerve for heights. And no rational person could do such a thing in a careless, haphazard way, for it is dangerous to climb up to such heights. But Chris does it with no complaint. Ricardo issues no protests, just carefully climbs the ladder.

Such things happen ten thousand times a day in our town, when you think of all the construction workers stepping out on their narrow beams, all the nurses ministering to people with dreadful and infectious diseases, all the police and firefighters and social workers daring to go into dangerous corners of our town. But, as Garrison Keillor says about the Norwegian bachelor farmers of Lake Wobegon: they get up in the morning, eat their oatmeal and their Powdermilk Biscuits, so that they can get up and do “what needs to be done.”

So, on this day of our Gospel story, Jesus gets up and does what needs to be done: he conquers death for his friend Lazarus. Death had always held an iron grip on its victims before. Now, Jesus breaks that grip, and Lazarus is set free. Thus begins the overthrow of death’s ancient tyranny.

Let me lift up three features of this story: First, Jesus uses a most peaceful term to describe death, our old enemy: he calls it “sleep.” He gives the impression that what he is about to do is as easy as waking a child from sleep. “Lazarus, come forth,” and the man does so, as if waking from sleep. He comes forth from death. An extraordinary thing, but described by Jesus as if it were easy. Second, it really was an extraordinary thing that Jesus accomplished. It is the most wonderful thing this world has ever seen and it teems with hope for you and me and our loved ones. And third, though it *appeared* effortless, this raising of Lazarus cost Jesus a great deal. For one thing, it cost him the determination of his enemies to kill him. But even more weighty, the ability of Jesus to convert death into sleep cost him his own life. But it was a cost he was willing to bear for you, for me.

That friendly word: sleep

These three point then. Let’s begin with the first one: Sleep. Jesus describes the death of Lazarus as sleep.

What a friendly word that is, sleep! The disciples are absolutely right: If Lazarus sleeps, he does well. He will wake stronger. He will wake refreshed. Unless he suffers from deep depression, the dawn will somehow rescue him, renew his energy, and launch him into a new day. Sleep is good. It is a lovely thing. How good it is for the weary one to be able to fall asleep. How good it is at the end of a long work day to be able to at last close the eyes and get some sleep.

Psalm 4 is called the “nighttime Psalm” because it ends with a happy reference to sleep:

In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for thou alone, O LORD, makest me dwell in safety.(Psalm 4:8, RSV)

And many of have been charmed by Martin Luther's "evening prayer" in his *Small Catechism*, with his final instruction for those who have said their prayer. The prayer ends like this:

For into your hands I commend myself: my body, my soul, and all that is mine. Let your holy angel be with me, so that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.

Then Luther gives his goodnight instruction, which goes simply like this:

Then you are to go to sleep quickly and cheerfully.

The disciples are right: If Lazarus sleeps, he does well.

Only, Lazarus does not sleep. He is dead! By the time Jesus arrives at his burial place, he has been dead so long, it is reasonable to expect corruption of the flesh and a stench. Death is a terrible reality -- an age-old reality humanity has too much knowledge of. Yet, Jesus baptizes death with a new word, "sleep." Our friend Lazarus sleeps. It is an extraordinary shift of vocabulary. And Jesus works this shift from "death" to "sleep" as if it is effortless, as if it is no big deal. It is an extraordinary thing done without need of applause. It is like the soldier rushing into battle or the firefighter rushing into the burning building, without even thinking to draw praise from the onlookers.

This shift is indeed wondrous

Second, this shift from "death" to "sleep" is indeed a wondrous thing. I can think of no higher wonder this world has even known. There is death: the final breath, the end of hopes and dreams, the exhaustion of efforts, the ceasing of surprises. There is the cold body. There is death piling up in our world, like Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones, in this morning's First Lesson. "Can these bones live?" It is the chief question. It certainly looks that they cannot live, for death has devoured its numberless victims.

But now in this morning's story, Jesus calmly declares an unheard of thing: this death is not death! It is not death, but sleep. And the disciples are right: if he sleeps, he does well. We will see him again. We will converse with him again. We will embrace him, embrace her again!

What a wonder was worked in our world, that day Jesus declared death to be sleep! And it is a wonder that lingers to our own day. Again, I am drawn back to that living sermon of hope preached by the two-hour funeral procession to the casket of former pastor Raymond Schulze -- the way his brothers and sisters in the Lord looked

upon him with faith that they would see him again, on yon shore, with health and clarity of mind, with the Lord himself wiping the tears from every eye. They looked upon Ray with affection, they touched his hands, they kissed his cheek. They did not count him lost though he had died. It was more that they took Jesus entirely at his word: this is not death, but sleep.

Back in Chapter Three of St. John, Jesus had spoken the wonderful words, “should not perish”:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.
(John 3:16, KJV)

Now, he nails it down. In his conversation with Martha, he makes that declaration that has long been cherished by the church and repeated so often at funerals:

²⁵Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶and whoever lives and believes in me shall *never die*. (John 11:25-26, RSV)

Something is happening to death, in this story. Its age-old grip is being loosed. Its tones of terror - death! - are being replaced with the peaceful tones of rest: this is not death, but sleep.

The cost

And now we come to the third part of this sermon. You would never guess it by the calmness and majesty of Jesus in this morning’s Gospel story, but this wonder he works, this change from death to sleep, is a wonder that is going to cost him his own life. These are the things of Holy Week, which is now soon upon us. When you return next Sunday, it will be Palm Sunday -- a Sunday that with a flick of the wrist suddenly becomes Passion Sunday. It is the Sunday when we will all take our parts in the congregational reading of the Passion story according to St. Matthew. We will read of our Lord’s terror in the Garden of Gethsemane and of his urgent prayer that he might be spared the cup he is soon to drink. We will read of his prayer of surrender, “not my will, but thine be done,” thereby opening himself to the horrors of his interrogation and crucifixion.

This morning, all is calm in Jesus, yet within a few verses of our Gospel story, we read an ominous thing. The miracle of the raising of Lazarus so troubles Jesus’s opponents that they resolve to kill him:

Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death. (John 11:53, KJV)

It seems odd that they should plot to kill the man who had just conquered death, but so they do. And so Jesus suffers.

The cause of it all

We will recall these things next week, starting next Sunday. But for now, I want simply to speak of the divine cause in the mighty heart of Jesus. The cause was you! It seems to be the case that Jesus simply could not abide the notion that you should die, that you should not have time to fulfill every good hope and dream that you've ever had. So, he means to provide you the time. And not even death is going to be able to get in the way.

So dream some *good* hopes and dreams. And get started on them even now. Seek something noble in life and start pursuing it. Press on toward that good dream, even if it seems that you will never have time to complete it. Your part is to begin. That too is part of this morning's story. Mary and Martha and the others in the story did not have power to summon Lazarus back to life, but they did have power to roll away the grave stone so that Lazarus could walk out, and they did have power to unwind those graves clothes so that Lazarus could go free. They did what they could do, leaving the larger part to Christ.

You know much about the kinds of hopes and dreams that have a chance in life, because you know a lot about Jesus. So, press on toward that good dream in your life. Peddle onwards, and trust in the One who can stare at death and calmly say, "Thou art but sleep." I mean Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.