

April 10, 2011
The 5th Sunday in Lent
The Rt. Rev. Shannon Johnston

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

So, what's in a miracle?

What is going on?

What does miracle mean? You know, all too quickly when we encounter miracle stories, and this one is certainly one of the greatest and most dramatic of all, we can become fixated on questions like "Well, did it really happen? Did it happen just like that?" Or we might even say, "Oh, I can't believe that really happened at all."

You know, the problem with miracles and understanding them in themselves is that they have to be, well, to use an imaginative term, miraculous. They have to be impossible! I mean, it wouldn't do for someone to come rushing up and say, "Did you hear about what Jesus did?" "No I didn't. What did he do?" "Well, he came into my house, and he put a pot of water on the fire and in a few minutes...the water was boiling! Can you believe that?" "Well, yes, I can believe that."

Miracles in the gospels, and really throughout Scripture, but focusing on the miracles in the gospel, the question is not really how they happened, or even if they happened or when they happened. That's not what's going on with miracles. There are three main questions about what do we think about miracles. And, one is that they are signs pointing to Jesus. Always. First, last and always, miracles are about pointing to Jesus. What the miracle has to say about Jesus the Christ, the son of God, the Messiah who has come into the world.

And what this magnificent miracle of the raising of Lazarus has to say about Jesus is that Jesus is the Lord of life and of death. Which is to say that there is nothing in the human experience that Jesus cannot touch, that Jesus cannot know. The wonderfully affecting term in the old translation "Jesus wept," or here "Jesus began to weep," tells us something that was hardly known in Jesus' time. That is that God is a personal God who cares, who is connected to human life and experience—everything that happens, all joys, all laughters, all tears, all sorrows.

So what it says about Jesus is what is reflected when Jesus says "I am the resurrection and the life. I am lord of life and of death."

And the second question, what a miracle says to us. Because there is no question that the writers of the gospels included and used the stories of the miracles for messages to us. What we are to know about ourselves and our relationship with that one who is born of life and death. And what this magnificent miracle, the raising of Lazarus says to us is this (and you've heard it also from the reading the Valley of the dry bones): Our destiny is not the grave. We are not people who will be defined by and bound by the confines of the grave. Oh, it may seem that way certainly! And in times of loss and death that's exactly what it feels like, which is why we need to remember that Jesus is the lord of life and death, and that there is no experience, no loss, that Jesus cannot touch and heal and bring his compassion to. But know this and know it well, that we are not people

who are on the way to death. In the risen Christ we are people who are on the way to being born into larger life. We are not to be held by the grave, as indeed Lazarus was not held by the grave.

And the third question, after what the miracles say about Jesus and what they say about us, is what it says to us about our lives in this world. A life of sin and brokenness, as opening collect said that only God can rule the unfooted order, the unruly wills and affections of sinners. The fact of sin is real. Indeed, it's the whole message of the season of Lent, that mortality is bound by sinfulness, as Lazarus was bound by his grave clothes. And you should know that from the very earliest times, from the first century commentaries into the fourth century, biblical commentaries, have always understood the story of Lazarus as a story for us about how sinfulness entombs us. That we are bound by sins as a body is bound by its burial shroud. And sin is understood as being dead to God.

That mortality itself is bound by sinfulness, and that that mortality is to fix on death. And so the raising of Lazarus says about our lives, that as Lazarus was called out of his death, we are called by the voice of the Lord out of sinfulness into new life. Out of mortality into immortality even here, even now. In a few moments you will notice that if you receive communion from me that when I put the bread in your hands, I say the body of our Lord Jesus Christ *keep* you in Eternal Life. Because our eternal lives are even here and now. That we are called of sinfulness, out of death in God into life in God—in this life, here and now.

Jesus is lord of life and death. We are *not* bound by the grave. That is *not* our destiny. And in this life we are called out of anything that will separate us from God. Anything that blocks us from knowing God and knowing God fully, there is no such thing as a sin that cannot be redeemed and forgiven. There is no such thing as a sin that is not known to God, that God cannot unbind you from.

Some of us may know what pain in life, sorrows in life, sinfulness in life, feels like. As we are bound, and as if we are dead to God. We may know, maybe most of us know right now what that feels like. But you know it's a very telling thing -- when Jesus says, after calling Lazarus forth out of the tomb -- he says, "unbind him, and let him go."

The word unbind is the very same word that's in the Lord's Prayer that says forgive our sins. Jesus uses this same term of forgiving sins as he uses for calling someone out of death and into life. Let him go. Set him free.

You are called. You are called to be one who rises into your own forgiveness and to be set free. Mortal! Child of God! Come forth. Come out! Sinfulness, mortality entombs you. Come out!

Lo and behold, even here, even now, even you! Even me. All of us, lo and behold, out of our darkness comes new and risen life.

That's the miracle.