



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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## The Resurrection Life

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 7, 2021*

*All Saints' Sunday*

*Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44*

*Evidently, this was needed.*

*Because people need to be screamed at with proof.*

*But he knew his friends.*

*Before they were, he knew them;*

*and they knew*

*that he would never leave them desolate here.*

*So he let his exhausted eyes close at first glimpse of the village.*

*And immediately he seemed to be standing in their midst.<sup>i</sup>*

The words I just read are the opening lines of a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke titled “The Raising of Lazarus.” In this haunting poem, Rilke illuminates the mysterious story of Lazarus in all its rawness, shining a harsh light on some of the story’s more troubling aspects: the sisters, Martha and Mary, who point their finger at Jesus, blaming him for the death because he didn’t get there in time; the crowd of onlookers—gawking and curious—who follow him to the place where Lazarus is buried; the overpowering stench of a decomposing body; and finally, the utter outrageousness of what Jesus did—calling out the name of a man who had been dead for four days, and bringing him back to life.

The raising of Lazarus is a story about life and death. But this is not life and death in any ordinary sense that we think about it, as an unbreachable chasm between existing and not existing. This is a story about life and death and life again. Life and death, intertwined. Life and death co-existing within each other, inseparable from each other, embodied in the person of Lazarus. As he emerges from the tomb, resurrected, Lazarus stands astride life and death, in what Rilke called “that green silent place where life and death are one.”

On this Feast of All Saints', we enter this “green silent place where life and death are one,” a place where we turn our hearts and minds to those who have gone before us, those known and unknown, who remain present with us in the communion of saints. And we turn our hearts and minds to our own losses, and to our own grief, remembering the people we have loved and lost. This day is set aside for a particular kind of remembrance, to remind us, as our Collect says, that God has “knit us together in

one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of Christ.” As we remember those who have gone before us, we also remember Christ’s triumphant victory over death, establishing for us a bond that cannot be broken, and offering us the promise of abundant life in him. The raising of Lazarus shows us that this life is not only for some distant future, it is present with us right here, right now.

The raising of Lazarus is the seventh and final sign Jesus gives his followers in John’s Gospel. By the time he arrives in the little village of Bethany, Jesus has already turned water into wine, healed the sick, fed the 5,000, and walked on water. Each of these signs was meant to teach us something about what this life of wholeness and abundance looks like. But the people got hung up on the miracles. They started believing in them instead of the God who performed them. Somehow or other, even in the face of these extraordinary events, they couldn’t shake their ordinary way of thinking: that life is a zero-sum game, that there are winners and there are losers. The winners live and the losers die. The problem is, in a zero-sum game, you can feel dead, even when you’re living.

So, after days of delay, Jesus finally gets to Bethany. In Rilke’s telling, by the time he encounters Mary and the rest of the mourners there, he’s exhausted. And he’s angry. Really angry. In fact, contrary to the gentle and compassionate Jesus portrayed in our reading, “angry” is a more accurate translation of the Greek than our softer version, which says that Jesus was “greatly disturbed.” Rilke describes Jesus with “a feverish outrage rising inside him at the glib ease with which words like ‘living’ and ‘being dead’ rolled off their tongues.” What the people don’t understand, what they seem to have completely missed in the other signs, is that Jesus, the Word made Flesh, has come to break down the barrier between life and death. And so, with this final sign, he doesn’t simply chip away at that barrier, he blows it wide open. “Evidently, this was needed,” Rilke writes. “Because people need to be screamed at with proof.”

If we listen closely, we can hear pieces of our own experiences echoed in the Lazarus story. We understand Mary’s anger and dismay when she confronts Jesus, wondering why, when he has helped so many others, he could not—would not—save her brother, his own beloved friend. We feel the burning tears on her cheeks and the crushing grief that brings her to her knees. And we know that Jesus’ presence with her now won’t erase the bitterness of her loss.

In the face of profound loss in our own lives, we may have recited something like Martha’s simple statement of faith, “I know that my brother will rise again in the resurrection on the last day,” even as we wonder what good that’s going to do us right now, left here with a gigantic hole in our hearts. Words we say, words we may actually believe. But in times of deep pain and suffering, sometimes even the most faithful words can be insufficient.

So, yes, we may recognize ourselves in this story. But let's face it, the raising of Lazarus is strange, so beyond our own reality of life and death. Even Martha, that woman of rock-solid faith, stalwart and true, could not possibly imagine what would happen next, as they approached the cave where Lazarus is buried. They roll away the stone, managing to stomach the smell of decay. Jesus prays, then calls out his name. "Lazarus, come out!" And the dead man, hearing Jesus call him, begins to stir in the darkness. In an instant, the future resurrection that Martha so fervently hopes and believes in, the future resurrection that we hope and believe in, is a reality here and now.

What does resurrection life look like? We don't know much about what happened to Lazarus after he was raised from the dead. We can only speculate about what resurrection life looked like for him. But we do have one clue. In his final appearance in John's Gospel, Lazarus, with his sisters Martha and Mary, hosts a meal for Jesus in his home. That same night, Mary extravagantly anoints Jesus with costly oil. Sharing a simple, life-giving meal with his friend, Lazarus, the man who had been raised from the dead, is unbound, and the stench of the tomb is replaced by fragrant perfume.

What does resurrection life look like for you? What does resurrection life look like for this community? Do we think of resurrection as just an abstract idea for some far-off future? Are we bound by our limited ideas of living and dying, or do we embody the life-sustaining gifts that Jesus offers? Can we emerge from the darkness of this difficult and painful time to fully embrace the promise of life in Christ, not only in our minds, but in our hearts and souls? In our Creed, we affirm our faith by saying, "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." Let us also allow the strange and extraordinary story of Lazarus to inspire us to look for resurrection right here today, within us and around us, in the company of saints.

And so, if you'll allow me to take some broad liberties with the Rilke's words, let us pray:

Jesus knew his friends. Before we were, he knew us; and we know that he would never leave us desolate here. So let your exhausted eyes close. And immediately, he will seem to be standing in your midst. *Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Raising of Lazarus." Translated from the German by Frank Wright, accessed at <https://bcm.bc.edu/index.html%3Fp=3435.html>

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