

**“Even Today”**  
**Psalm 130, John 11:1-45, April 2, 2017**  
**Congregational Church of Pinehurst**  
**Reverend Martha M. Nilsen**

This week I got to pondering the resurrection of Lazarus. It caused me to imagine my own resurrection. If I died and was resurrected to new life I would like to come back as a 40 something year-old with wisdom well beyond my years. But I don't think that's exactly what happened to Lazarus. I sense from the story that Lazarus came back the same person he was when he died. I wonder, given a second chance at life, did Lazarus live any differently from his prior life? Would you?

If Jesus has the power and ability to bring Lazarus back to life, it's very hard then not to ask, why didn't he bring back my sister, sister-in-law, or nephew, all of whom died far too young? Why didn't he resurrect the lives of your family members who died prematurely or the lives of young parents upon whom their innocent children depend? Jesus claims in verse 25, “I am the resurrection and the

life,” but what does Jesus mean? Of those we have lost, not one of them was resurrected as Jesus resurrected Lazarus. Nowadays, if Jesus isn't raising anyone from their deaths, then as William Barclay argues, the words and acts of resurrection performed by Jesus back in 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. has little if any relevance for us today. Conclusions like these arise *if* you read the story of the raising of Lazarus literally – that is as a real, physical event. But Barclay invites us to look at Lazarus' return to life and Jesus as “The Resurrection and The Life” from a different perspective. Based upon his own theological reflection, Barclay concludes, “if this story is taken physically and literally then, Jesus is in fact promising something which he cannot and does not perform.” But, if the raising of Lazarus wasn't a physical, literal event, then what was it? Can we interpret this story in a way that has relevance for us today?

In simplest terms, Barclay interprets the raising of Lazarus as a spiritual event. According to Barclay, Lazarus was raised from a figurative death – a death from spiritual malaise manifest in sin, and not from death caused by the

cessation of his bodily functions. Given this perspective, the new life to which Lazarus and all of us can be raised leads us to witness to a Living God whose liberating power forgives us and sets us on a new path or way *if* we will accept the resurrecting presence of Jesus in our lives. This is what Jesus meant when he announced “I am the resurrection and the life.”

I assume that for some Christians, Barclay’s interpretation is considered slanderous because it reduces the power of Jesus as a miracle worker. It is far more impressive and sensational to raise someone from physical death than spiritual death. But as I pointed out last week, I don’t believe Jesus ever did anything for sensational puposes. Others may find Barclay’s interpretation uplifting because the account of Lazarus exiting a tomb of **spiritual death** is believable but more importantly offers us promise for our lives today. Barclay explains, “If this story is simply the story of the raising of a dead man in the village of Bethany somewhere about the year 28 or 29 A.D., then it has nothing to do with us; it cannot and it does not happen

now; but if it is a story of the defeat of the death caused by sin, then it is telling of something which Jesus Christ can do, and does, every day in life.” That’s good news!

Remember, though, that Jesus never intended forgiveness to an easy way to avoid looking seriously at one’s misconducts. The forgiveness of God and Jesus demands completing the inner work necessary so as not to repeat ethical mistakes therein enabling and ensuring a better future for you and me. Barclay’s perspective of a spiritual resurrection from spiritual death is critical because the world needs a way to rise into a new, unified, non-violent life in Christ or “The Holy” or whatever you call It. A Universal union of spirit would be the ultimate, sensational miracle!

“In his book *The Bible Speaks to You*, Robert McAfee Brown tells how he was chaplain on a troopship on which 1,500 American Marines were returning to America from Japan for discharge. To his surprise and delight a group of them requested a bible study. Towards the end of the trip they were studying John 11. Professor Brown wondered

what the men were making of Jesus' claim, "I am the Resurrection and the Life!" The question is not, "Was a corpse reanimated in 30 AD?" Rather, are these words true in 1946 AD? At the end of the study a young Marine came to him saying, 'Padre, everything in this story we have been studying today points to me. I've been in hell for the last six months, and since I have heard this chapter I am just getting free.' He went on to explain. He had gone into the Marines straight from college, and had been sent overseas to Japan. He had been bored and had gone out to find amusement and had got into trouble, bad trouble. No one knew about it – *but God knew about it*. He had a terrible feeling of guilt. He felt that his life was ruined. He felt he could never again face his family, even if they never knew the wretched story. 'I've been a dead man,' he said, 'condemned by myself, condemned by my family, if they knew. But, after reading this chapter, I'm alive again.' He went on, 'The Resurrection and the Life that Jesus was talking about is the real thing here and now.' That lad had an arduous job to put things straight again, but he did it.

When life seemed like it had ended for him, when he felt a dead man, Jesus raised him to life anew, out of a life which sin had killed. And that is exactly what this story means."

Barclay concludes, "The aim is not to explain away the miracles; the aim is to appropriate the miracles." It is true, "there is *little* relevance in the story of Jesus who raised a dead man to life in Bethany two thousand years ago, but who never does that now; there is *every* relevance in a Christ who to this day daily raises men [and women]" from whatever spiritual death they suffer from - the death of sin, guilt, grief over loss, aimlessness, greed, lack of purpose – and liberates them to new life as found through Jesus and a renewed spirituality.

To close, the story of the raising of Lazarus and Jesus as the Resurrection and the Life are meant to describe spiritual changes and experiences which are still occurring in the power of the risen Lord. It lays out the timeless truth that because of Jesus personal transformations have *happened* and are *still happening*. Glory be to the Jesus, our source for Resurrection and new Life! Amen.