

“Do You Believe This?”

John 11:1-45

We are now just two weeks away from celebrating the Feast of the Resurrection. Of course, before we get to that joyous day we have some heavy steps coming our way. It probably is human nature to want the glory and to avoid suffering at any cost. That may be one explanation for why Easter has a higher attendance than any of the holy days prior to it. We prefer saying and singing “alleluia”. Many people like praise hymns that make them feel good. They would rather skip any song or hymn that provokes sadness or grief. The truth is, we can’t experience the full and complete joy of Easter without walking every step it takes to get to the empty tomb. Only after suffering and dying with Jesus can we fully appreciate the power and hope of the resurrection. Today’s story of the raising of Lazarus is found only in John’s gospel. It is the last of the signs by Jesus recorded by John. This story allows the reader to know that soon Jesus himself will be facing the trials of his own suffering and death. What we will want to remember is that in this particular story Jesus defines what he will do before he does it. Previously, Jesus gave the meaning to the “sign” after it happened. That is not true with the raising of Lazarus. And so today we keep in mind that Jesus tells us in advance as well what will happen before it has happened. We who believe in him believe we will never really die, but will live eternally. There is limited proof, if any at all, that that is absolutely true. We don’t know for sure if the valley of bones will come back to life. We can’t prove it scientifically that we will be alive in heaven. We weren’t there when Jesus talked to Mary in the garden that first Easter morning; neither were we with the disciples when he appeared that evening, or even with St. Paul when Jesus spoke to him from heaven. We don’t have the evidence before us, but we believe. This may be the time to remember this—we believe not because of the miracles but because of Jesus. When Jesus asks Martha, “Do you believe this?” She answered, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Suppose Prince William was simply a common William, okay, someone common like me. Do you think he would be marrying his darling Kate, or would she be in love with him, wanting to spend the rest of her life in his castle at any address? Some people fall in love with what a person has rather than who the person is. Someone says, "The next time I marry I'm marrying for money!" Unfortunately, some people follow Jesus because of what he did and what they want him to do. Some were mumbling in the background when Jesus finally arrived four days late about whether or not he really was who they say he is because of what did not happen. Before anything happens or might happen according to our wish list with God, we need to accept him first of all and above all as our God. We believe he is God who took on our flesh. We believe Jesus is the Immanuel—the God with us. We believe he is the resurrection and life—he is the Messiah. We believe that Jesus came to us, lived on this earth with us and still does in spirit. As he wept at the grave of his friend, we believe Jesus knows what pains us in the deepest corner of our soul and heart. We believe God is our God, our friend, our Lord, our Savior, the Christ, the Messiah. Even if we never received any personal favor or grant, or miracle, we still believe Jesus is the Christ.

Martha had to accept Jesus as the resurrection and the life even before her brother was raised from the dead, and before she ever realized what Jesus was about to suffer. She already believed if Jesus had been there sooner, her brother's outcome would have been different. Now, though, she takes Jesus at his word that her brother would rise again. It was in Jesus that she trusts, not just in what he said he could do. It was Jesus she believed. Jesus pronounces the same trust in him to us. He gives us the certainty and hope that there is life in him. He unashamedly weeps with us at the grave because he knows the pain we feel when we have had to gather there. He knows the heartaches that cut deeply and the despair felt when left alone and without. Jesus is the hope we have and the only hope we trust that when he speaks to us his word of promise and hope, we cling to it. We cling to it not just because we want the results, but because we love him. And as Mary we, too, offer to anoint him with oil and our tears because of our love for him. We love

him because he first loves us, and no matter what else we get or don't get will never diminish his love for us, and our love for him. Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah.

A trend in funerals today is for someone to give a eulogy of the person who has died. It is happening more today than when I first began my ministry in the mid 1970s. I'll be the first to say that I am uncomfortable with them. Most eulogies are better spoken during the lunch or before the service begins. I say that not because I am uncaring, but because eulogies are often very subjective and distract from what the funeral is really about. We are uncomfortable talking about death. We can forget that all of us are sinners, and none of us were ever always good or never bad. We die, and just like Lazarus, our bodies don't last long after we die. We are sad at death, even if it is the death of the family pet. (In the Springville Journal this last week there was an ad taken out against a person who had killed a family dog. A little person in the house cried himself to sleep that night. Of course he would!) Why should we make excuses for not talking about death? It is hard, and it brings out so much pain, fear, worry, loss, despair in us and with us. Remember, though, Jesus is in the midst of all of that with us.

Sometimes we think our faith will save us from the pain of death. But it won't. Our faith will give us hope that those without faith lack. Faith in Jesus doesn't guarantee our loved ones will always get better or never have an accident. Faith in Jesus doesn't always bring miracles, explained or not. A doctor with faith may not be as good a doctor as one without faith. Miracles happen to unbelievers sometimes also. And miracles don't bring people to faith as often as we think they might, or keep people in faith. Faith in Jesus will.

We believe in Jesus with or without the miracles. We believe in Jesus even if this story about Lazarus was never told to us. We believe in Jesus even though we have no proof he rose from the dead. We believe in Jesus because he is our Lord, our God and our Savior. Jesus is God in the flesh for us, who knows our lives better than we do, and surely understands us even better than we do. He knows our failings and failures,

and he knows what threatens and annoys us. Our sin never is hidden from him no matter how hard we try, and our hypocrisy is quite obvious to him even though we think we are very religious. And yet, he loves us. Everything about us that might drive away a prince or princess from us is not at all a matter of desertion for him. When we see the symbols of our Christian faith—when we look at the cross, pour water over our heads, drink wine and eat bread, we believe that Christ loves us giving us our salvation, new birth each and every day, and a feast worthy for the greatest of kings and queens. He gives us his very body and blood, shed for us, given up for us, poured out for us. His love is what brings us close to him, and even if we might be unable to prove anything about God's abilities to move mountains or raise the dead, we can prove his love by the way we live.

That is really the miracle. The miracle in this story looks to be the raising of Lazarus after being dead four days. But perhaps the greater miracle is seen in Mary and Martha, in Lazarus, and in the crowd. They obeyed their Lord. They listened to what he asked, and they responded with their actions. It was their trust in Jesus who was more than just some good friend, but their Lord. And so the miracle continues for the people the likes of us. Being faithful people has not made us rich in money or wealth necessarily. Being faithful people has not paid off the debt of the church or even some we have accumulated ourselves. Being faithful has not made us immune from sickness or disease, harm or danger. Being faithful has not given us straight "A" students. Being faithful, though, has given us the miracle of life that we live out now. We have hope that death is not our conqueror, that sin will not overcome us, and that nothing shall ever separate us from the love of Christ. We believe that Jesus is our Lord, and that he will raise us from the dead to life eternal because he says he will. We trust the story of Lazarus and the story about to unfold these coming days, that in them, we, too, shall be the recipients of the greatest love ever possible. And thus we believe that in our lives and in our deaths, God's glory will still abound. We know that because we believe in Jesus who gives us his resurrection and life forever. The Lord be with you.