Coming Back From the Dead

Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-44

Our passage this morning is an edited version of John 11, to cut to one point.

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. [3] So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

” [5] Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. [6] So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, [7] and then he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.”

[17] On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.[21] “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. [22] But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

[23] Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

[24] Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the end of time.”

[25] Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; [26] and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

[27] “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

[28] After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside.[32] When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

[33] When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. [34] “Where have you laid him?” he asked.

“Come and see, Lord,” they replied.

[35] Jesus wept.

[38] Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. [39] “Take away the stone,” he said.

“But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”

[41] So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I am grateful that you have heard me.[43] When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” [44] The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

It’s good to be home… My deep gratitude to all of you for giving me time off. I didn’t think I needed it. I was wrong.

My deep thanks to Mark and Julie for putting together a lineup of super speakers and moving worship services. I worried our speakers wouldn't be inspiring. My anxiety was misplaced.

My thanks to Brenda for keeping the ship running and our congregational leaders for keeping us on track. Something I just don't have to worry about.

And my profound thanks for your letters, cards, soup, and well-wishes. If I took our prayer life for granted, it surprised me how much I grew being on the receiving end of prayer and love. I wanted to say a word about the love that brings us back from the brink this morning.

The raising of Lazarus is a miracle story. If you are like me, these stories are a bit of an embarrassment to my scientific

mindset. I studied philosophy and politics in college. It ruins your ability to read these texts simply, so I instinctively try to avoid them.

But then, most of us have an experience like Lazarus, not from dying too young anymore, but from living longer than we should. These days, we are victims of our own medical success.

How many of you have had a medical problem that required an operation, and that problem would have likely killed you if you couldn't have had the operation, because you were born before surgery was invented? How many of you have had medicine, antibiotics, vaccines, for a disease that would have killed you 200 years ago, before we discovered antibiotics and vaccines? How many of you have had cancer, stroke, heart

disease, or a car wreck that required EMT intervention in an ambulance, the ICU, chemotherapy, radiation, or MRI scans of your brain?

In Jesus day, the average Roman lifespan was 30. That number was low because of infant mortality, but it is also true that infections grew to horrific proportions before antibiotics.

My mother had a book of Leonardo da Vinci's sketches of ordinary people in Florence with all manner of warts, strange growths, skin conditions, hunched backs, and missing teeth. It was sobering to see as a child, and it was probably a pretty accurate depiction of everyday life. As Thomas Hobbes used to say, "life was nasty, brutish, and short". And that is probably one of the main reasons that Jesus was remembered as a

miracle healer. What ordinary people needed most back then was miraculous healing, as medical care was so limited.

Not so today. We have hospitals that are better than miracles because they make extraordinary cures routine and ordinary. But they are still literally amazing, beyond the comprehension of ordinary folks. I asked the team to show me the heart pump and lung machine that keeps you alive during heart surgery. You can see it, but you can't really believe that this contraption actually works so well.

My surgeon showed me the replacement artery and the replacement heart valve he was going to install. I asked about the quality and longevity of both. He said, "Well, the replacement parts are better than the original."

Today, we are blessed to find ourselves approaching near unto death because we have life-extending technology that can monitor us so well that we can bring people to the edge of their mortal limit- think chemotherapy, think the ICU, think of the heart-stimulating drugs that can keep the heart beating for days after the brain has stopped functioning, even seemingly routine things like blood transfusions after car wrecks that keep us going artificially until we can stanch the wound. They are literally astonishing.

I just recently heard a presentation at a Board meeting at Overlook from our neuroscience team that they anticipate being able to place chips in our brains in the near future that will be able to ameliorate depression or perhaps cure it altogether. And we have a woman in our congregation who has had immunotherapy for a cancer that was 100% fatal until

recently, and she is cancer-free now. It is one of the areas of AI research that looks to make huge breakthroughs on diseases that have plagued us for not just centuries, but for millennia. Some of them are so far beyond the scope of what I've known in my lifetime that I literally have difficulty imagining what we are talking about.

So many of you have been to the edge of death, and others have been to the edge of death with your loved ones, because of our awe-inspiring life-extending technology. It is a profound emotional and spiritual journey, and maybe that story of Lazarus is relevant to us today in a whole new context.

What strikes me about that journey personally is how being near death shrinks the scope of your vision. Pain just does that. Mortal threats just do that. Even if you would like to focus on

your friends and your family, the worse your pain gets, the less you can get outside of yourself. Staying alive takes all your energy, all your focus. Time becomes elongated. You can't divert yourself with your phone because you can't concentrate enough to read it. You can't sleep. You are forced to wait for this phase to pass, for some small hope on the horizon that your condition is temporary, that it will change.

That is why it is so important that we have a community of prayer, a cloud of people who surround us, wishing us well, telling us that a better day will come, and reminding us that we are loved. We need that the most, we can remember it the least, and generate a positive disposition the least.

Your circle gets smaller and smaller. You can't see people. You can't talk. I know for me that when I'm really in trouble,

there is only one person that I want to connect with, for a lot of complex reasons related to why we got married so young. She doesn't need to talk to me. I just need her to hold my hand.

You know we have a bevy of studies that show that if someone really close to you holds your hand, like your Mom, if you are blessed to be supported by someone close to you, you actually can tolerate much, much more pain, you can transcend much, much more fear and anxiety. Deep love is like that. We like to talk about how individual and tough we are as humans, but we are an embedded species. We are born into families. We need our people, and the older we get, the more "our people" become our spiritual people, our close friends, the people we've adopted along the way because they are real and they are there for us. We need these folks. We can become heroes with the right team around us.

One night in the ICU, I was having a bad reaction to the anesthesia from the operation. It was like a nightmare that I couldn't turn off, no matter what I did. Kate called me to say goodnight. She hung up. I was so afraid, all of a sudden, that I started to weep uncontrollably, like I might not be able to stop.

One of the nursing assistants saw this, dropped what he was doing, and they are always doing something important in the ICU. Every minute in the ICU has a critical challenge. He came over to me and held me, held me like a pro. What an Angel. You know, the word 'Angel' simply means a 'messenger from God'. They aren't just the winged kind like the Romans depicted them. We can all become God's Angels through our compassion, through our care, through our humane response to suffering that happens around us all the time.

How great are those Angels who appear when your connection to this world can't be there? When you are alone and afraid? And just like God herself was hugging me up, I regained my composure, sobered up a bit. It was still awful, but I knew it would be okay. He got me a drink, and it passed, transcended by care, by compassion, by love.

So much of the fear and anxiety that we experience in this state results from the physical trauma that our bodies have been through. Our bodies sense proximity to death, being 'in extremis,' and the body responds reflexively, autonomically, subconsciously. And we humans, having advanced spiritual and emotional capacity, can't help but be reflective existentially about the prospect of 'not being'. The reality is profoundly present with us in a way that we can feel, and our souls have a visceral response.

What I found so moving was what came next, over the next three or four days. We are told in our text this morning that Jesus returned to see Lazarus because of love. Mary speaks like all family members in a state of desperation, “If you had been here, he would not have died.” And then, in simple but moving words, Jesus says, “Take me to him”. That is what love does. It goes to where we are, in support, with what we have to give.

And that is when miracles happen. I was so weak that I couldn’t pray. But you prayed for me. That is what we do: we provide the faith our loved ones need when they don’t have faith in themselves.

It is what parents the world over do for their drug addicted children, what AA people do when alcoholics are out of their

minds, and their family members have finally said, " No more”. The AA family shows up. They won’t let alcoholics go.

I had just two things on those nights when I was so uncomfortable I couldn’t sleep, just watching the night sky over Morristown: a small patch of prayer cloth that Kate gave me from the congregation, and a short stack of ‘get well’ cards that our children made in Sunday School. Those kids' cards were so moving, with their childlike, emphatic ‘Get well soon’ in large crayon letters, some backward, as if they were pregnant with innocent hope.

Physically, I was too miserable to pray, too weak to generate a positive mood in such physical discomfort. The kids did it for me. Friends did it for me. And all of the congregation did it for me. At the time, it is huge, and in low moments, you

can literally feel a surrounding envelope of love and support. I can't thank you enough. It allowed me to undergo a profound spiritual transformation and cultivate gratitude, especially in the midst of distress. Life is good, even in suffering. Remember what you live for. Remember what you've been privileged to know in this life. You can build on that.

Gratitude is the opening bow of the spiritual life. Slowly, it starts to pervade your being. In our text this morning, Jesus heals Lazarus with love and brings him back to life. And then he tells people to take off the burial wrap bandages they used in the ancient world to prepare the body for death.

I kept reflecting on that in the hospital. Every day, I got a little stronger, and slowly, they removed the drainage tubes of life that kept infection from my gut. They removed emergency

tubes that went to my heart to quickly feed heart-stimulating medicine if I should have cardiac arrest. They removed IV's. And then came the day when they removed the EKG wires that monitored my heart every minute for a week, and I could go home. Sitting outside the hospital in a wheelchair, I remember cutting off my hospital ID bracelet, no longer having to confirm my name and date of birth for the nurses' charts. I was returning to normal, free from the life supports that kept me safe as I hovered so close to death.

How blue the sky was, how crisp the air. How wonderful to just drive in the car and be present in the moment. Life is so wonderful, and it is such a privilege to be alive and vital, as Pete Moran used to say, "Sitting up and taking nourishment."

You know, our story was written before the advent of modern biography. As with all ancient stories, we don't know what Lazarus was thinking. In almost all modern stories, our authors share internal, personal thoughts of what people are thinking and feeling as the story unfolds. Perhaps it is just as well, because this story is not about Lazarus. Spiritually, our lesson is about you.

Mary Oliver asks, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" God gives us moments, usually near death, when we become spiritually awakened to the wonder of life. And the older we get, the more aware we are that the runway of time we have left is short. Our blessed reprieve is not forever, but it does give us a block of time we wouldn't otherwise have.

Perhaps because we know that it is limited and defined, the question of meaning becomes spiritually compressed. What is important now? What new mission opens before you? What comes into focus that was marginal earlier in your life? In John 3, Jesus says, “You cannot see the kingdom of God unless you are born again.” What will you do with your reset? Not everything. You are too mature to have the view that your life is an open-ended possibility, like you did when you graduated from college.

No, this time you are more focused on the profounder spiritual reasons that we are on earth, more on what will bring us deeper fulfillment, more on what will make us see the world as God sees it- warm, humane, compassionate, full of love, gracious, life-giving, bending towards justice and peace, reconciling where we can.

And may you fill your time with deeper meaning. May you become more like God, quite in spite of yourself. You are more of an Angel than you know, and God is not done with you yet. Not yet my friend. Amen.

Our first reading is an extended metaphor of redemption. It exemplifies the prophetic tradition that invokes God's healing in our lives. I read from Ezekiel 37.

The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2 God led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. 3 He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

I said, "Lord, you alone know."

4 Then God said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! 5 This is what the Almighty says to these bones: I will make breath[a] enter you, and you will come to life. 6 I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life.'"

7 So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. 8 I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

9 Then God said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy and say to it, 'This is what the Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" 10 So I prophesied as God commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

[11] Then God said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried
up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ [12] Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Almighty
says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the
land of Israel. [13] Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you
up from them. [14] I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you
will know that God is with you.’”