



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity, September 19th, 2010

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

Today's Gospel concerns a common or garden miracle – the raising of young man from the dead. Perhaps it seems a bit strange to describe the raising of a person from the dead as "common or garden." After all, raisings from the dead are a rare phenomenon today – just as they were a rare phenomenon in the Holy Land of 2,000 years ago.

Stories about "miracle cures" and "wonder drugs" are quite common these days, but such descriptions are pure hyperbole. For a brief period in the Holy Land, however, true miracles were relatively commonplace. During his three-year ministry, Jesus not only cured people of a variety of incurable diseases, he also raised many people from the dead.

John the Baptist's disciples had asked him: "Art thou He that should come, or do we look for another?" He replied: "Go your way and tell John what things ye have seen and heard: How that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the Gospel is preached."

Jesus is not merely citing happenings that John's disciples have eye-witnessed. He is also quoting the Prophet Isaiah to them. And he didn't say: "A dead person has been raised up." Or even "two [or a few] dead people were raised up." Jesus says: "The dead are raised up." In other words, it's an on-going process and it involves a substantial number of people.

It is also important to remember that this is an event that happened at the very beginning of his career. Thus, by the time of His Crucifixion, it

seems fair to assume that many more such raisings up from the dead had taken place.

Now why did Jesus insert these two types of miracles into His quotes from Scriptural passages that mention neither? We can say for certain that it wasn't ignorance. He is usually very accurate in His scriptural quotations.

Could it be he was anticipating that skeptics would try to dismiss his miraculous healings as "hypnosis", "mind over matter" or "auto-suggestion"? To be sure, these phenomena were almost as well known 2000 years ago as they are today.

The answer is possibly so. You see, if there are two sorts of condition that are quite unsuitable for treatment by hypnosis or autosuggestion, they are leprosy and death. Leprosy is a disease that horribly disfigures on its victims. Only God can repair physical damage such as leprosy inflicts. Only God can repair a broken human body sufficiently to raise it up from the dead. Thus, when Jesus performed miracles of this sort, he was silently demonstrating His divinity.

The raising up of the widow's son was thus by no means unusual. Matthew must have seen Jesus perform such miracles many times. Why, then, did this miracle make such a strong impression on him that he felt compelled to record it?

First, this miracle took place shortly after the most momentous day in his life. It took place within days of Jesus choosing Matthew and eleven other ill-assorted men to his apostles.

And it was immediately preceded by a Roman Centurion – one of the Jews' imperial masters – begging Jesus to save the life of his sick slave and making an extraordinary confession of faith:

"Lord . . . I am not worthy that thou shouldst enter under my roof: Wherefore neither thought I myself worthy to come unto thee: but say in a word, and my servant shall be healed." Such humble words from an officer in the proud Roman army were not easily forgotten.

Jesus, accompanied by his newly appointed disciples, was approaching a small town called Nain when they encountered a funeral cortege leaving the city gate. From Matthew's account, it seem the widow's son was highly regarded for a large crowd of people were accompanying his body to the cemetery.

The miracle was memorable for the fact that the widow didn't beg Jesus' help. Matthew tells us Jesus acted entirely on his own initiative: "When the Lord saw her," he writes. "He had compassion on her," But Jesus' only recorded words to her are not words of comfort but of command: "Do not weep," he tells her.

He then walks up to bier and touches it. The men carrying it come to a halt. Jesus looks at the corpse and issues another order: "Young man, get up." And the young man sat up and began to speak. Jesus then presented him to his mother. That's it!

Matthew was clearly amazed that Jesus raised the man from the dead by command. He didn't get down on his knees and pray – begging God's help. It struck Matthew as forcibly as a slap in the face is that Jesus simply ordered the young man back to life. It was an act of creation – an act only God can perform.

It was mind-blowing. Before a large crowd, Jesus, entirely on his own authority, with no intercessions to God, calmly – casually almost – says: "Young man, get up." And the dead man gets up as though nothing at all had happened to him. It was an extraordinary display of Jesus' powers as God incarnate.

Let us now contrast this miracle with another that is very similar, but which took place towards the end of our Lord's earthly ministry – the raising of Lazarus. The situation was quite different from that at the town of Nain. Jesus

wasn't raising a perfect stranger, but one of his closest friends – a man who had been decomposing in the grave for four days.

Instead of walking straight up to the tomb and issuing a peremptory order – "Lazarus get up" – Jesus makes a big production out of it. St John tells us Jesus groaned in the spirit and was troubled." and "Jesus wept." He doesn't act at all like -- (V. 35) the shortest verse in The Bible. Again, in Verse 38, he tells us that Jesus the same person who ordered the widow at Nain: "Do not weep."

So what has changed? Why should Matthew's masterful Jesus be so different from John's? First, there's the question of Lazarus' feelings? Unlike the widow's son at Nain, he had had an opportunity to know Christ and believe. At the time, He was raised up He was enjoying the bliss of life everlasting. Jesus was certainly doing him no favor to drag him back to this vale of tears.

Then there is the question of Mary and Martha. They are both long time followers of Jesus. They are among his most beloved disciples. Yet unlike the centurion: "Lord, trouble not thyself . . . I am not worthy . . ." They are bitterly angry. They berate Jesus for failing to drop everything and come to them. They tell him: "Lord, if you had been here, [our] brother had not died."

The centurion had known Jesus only days; Mary and Martha three full years. Yet the Roman believed, while his two closest friends doubted. Jesus told Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believes on me, though he were dead yet shall he live: And whosoever lives and believes on me shall never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, I do," she replied, but secretly she summoned her sister to help pressure Jesus to raise Lazarus.

That alone was enough to justify Jesus weeping, groaning and being troubled in the spirit. Asked to profess their faith, Martha and Mary equivocated – just as we equivocate when, in the Creeds, we say, "I believe" but actually mean "I think" or "I feel." *AMEN*

To the only wise God, our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. AMEN