



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity, October 9th, 2011

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

Today's Communion Gospel tells how Jesus raised a young man from the dead in the small town of Nain, not far from his home village of Nazareth. And one of the lessons appointed for Morning Prayer is St. John's account of another miraculous resurrection – the raising of Lazarus.

The reports of these two incidents are strikingly different. St. Luke's description of the raising of the widow's son at Nain is terse and to the point – a mere six verses and all business. He records the facts, ma'am, and nothing but the facts.

By contrast, St. John's account of the raising of Lazarus is finely detailed. It begins with a retelling of events that happened almost a week before and proceeds for 43 verses before we get to the dramatic conclusion of the story.

Yet there is a remarkable similarity between these two events. And I am not referring to the end result – the bringing of two dead people back to life. It is fact that Jesus performs of these stunning miracles in an amazingly casual fashion.

He doesn't go through any elaborate ritual – as did the great prophets Elijah and Elisha when they raised children from the dead. He doesn't even mutter a brief prayer. At Nain, he off-handedly says to the corpse: "Okay, Kid, get up." And at the graveyard in Bethany, he simply strolls up to the newly opened tomb and hollers: "Lazarus, come out."

Both events must have shocked the onlookers, and not just because of what he had done, but because of the way in which he did it. Raising people from the dead was one of the signs by

which the Jews of the First Century expected to identify the Messiah. Yet he didn't perform the miracles in the way they expected the Messiah to perform them..

He showed no piety when he performed them – and certainly no humility. When Elijah raised the son of the widow of Zarepeth from the dead, he breathed three times on the lad and cried out to God: "I pray, Lord my God, let the breath of life return to the body of this child." And the child started breathing again.

When Elisha raised the son of the Shunamite woman from the dead, he first prayed long and hard. Then he stretched himself out on the boy, his mouth to the child's mouth, his eyes to the child's eyes, his hands to the child's hands. He repeated this ritual twice, then breathed into him seven times. At this, the child opened his eyes.

This is the sort of way pious Jews expected the Messiah to behave. But Jesus did nothing of the kind. He simply strolled up and, casually – off-handedly even – ordered the person back to life. It was though he was acting entirely on his own account. He didn't even offer a prayer of thanks when the dead came back to life.

The reason for this should be quite apparent: Both The Book of Genesis and the Gospel According to St. John hail Jesus as the creator – the Logos, the holy Word that brings all things into being. There was no need for Jesus to pray to anyone. It was he who made the executive decision. It was he who carried out the executive act. Surely it would have been rather silly for him to pray to himself.

It is not easy for us today to grasp this. But for Jews of the First Century A.D. it was an utterly outlandish notion. Could God really have sent them a Messiah who treated God so off-handedly. Put yourself in their position. If you encountered some guy wandering around the place casually raising folks from the dead, would you be inclined to regard him as God . . . or the devil?

John the Baptist actually saw the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus at his baptism and the heard God's own voice declare: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." Yet he was so disturbed by reports of Jesus' behavior, he sent two of his most trusted disciples to ask him: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we looking for another?"

Some of those who witnessed the raising of Lazarus were so disquieted by what they had seen, they reported it the Pharisees. They, in turn, were so disturbed they convened a meeting with their theological archenemies, the Sadducee chief priests, to decide on a course of action. Their decision was that Jesus should die before he led the whole Jewish nation to its destruction. It is a worthwhile spiritual exercise to ponder what we would have done in their shoes.

The striking differences between these events are as telling as their similarities. When he raised the young man at Nain, Jesus was positively jaunty. "Don't cry," he told the boy's mother, as he walked up to the stretcher on which the body was laid out. When the boy arises, Jesus cheerily hands him over to his mother.

Contrast this happy scene with the raising of Lazarus: First, Jesus is manifestly reluctant to return from Galilee to Judea when he gets the news of Lazarus' illness. When he finally arrives, Lazarus has been four days in the grave and, as his sister Martha observes, is almost certainly in an advanced stage of decomposition.

Instead of immediately raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus spends a long time in fruitless debate with the young man's sisters, Mary and Martha, trying to persuade them not to press for Lazarus to be raised from the dead. "I am the resurrection and the life," he tells Martha, "He that believeth on me, though he were dead yet shall he live. And he that liveth and believeth on me shall never die. Believest thus this?"

When suasion fails, St. John tells us Jesus "groans in his spirit" and is "deeply moved." When he arrives at the graveyard, he himself starts weeping and he is still "groaning in himself" as he approaches the tomb. Why does he go through all this palaver before performing a miracle that for him is clearly a piece of cake? If he was so cheerful about raising a young stranger, why was he not even happier to bring one of his closest friends back to life?

The key lies in the fact that the miracle at the city of Nain involved a young man who met Jesus for the first time as he arose from the dead. Lazarus, by contrast, was one of Jesus' closest friends and disciples. The implications of this can be deduced from Martha's reply to Jesus after he told her: "I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth on me, though he were dead yet shall he live. And he that liveth and believeth on me shall never die. Believest thou this?"

Martha's reply was emphatic: "Yea, Lord: I believe that thou are the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world." It is hard to imagine that Lazarus would have answered the same question any less emphatically.

In raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus was compelling him to give up happiness of a degree that he had never before experienced to return what is rightly described as a "troubled" life here on earth. Can you conceive of the disappointment and desolation Lazarus must have felt. His, after all, was no near death experience of going towards the light. He had been well and truly dead for four days.

Tough though it was on Lazarus, for Christians the story of Jesus raising him from the dead should be one of the most encouraging passages in the New Testament. It is our guarantee that our lives to come will not be an opaque and dreary bit part in events out there in the great beyond – like the proverbial month of Sundays. It will be dynamic and joyful and pleasurable beyond our imagining.

I can't tell you what this sort of live would be like. I've never been up there. But if actions speak louder than words, the fact that Jesus wept at the prospect of bringing Lazarus back to earth means we can look forward to having the time of our lives. That explains why we call it the "larger life" of course. *AMEN.*