

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year A, 2011
John 11: 1-45
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

In the Gospel this morning, we have the story of death of Lazarus, the brother of two women, all of whom were friends and disciples of Jesus. They were people of great faith. Lazarus became sick and died. Our Lord came to his village, and to the grave, and restored Lazarus to life. This was one of the last miracles recorded by the Evangelist John, before our Lord's crucifixion and resurrection. It is a very moving story.

There is a danger in telling the story though, and the danger is this. It is very easy to get so focused on focused on the healing or restoration of life, and so hung up on our own understanding of biology that we lose sight of the point that the evangelist is trying to make; Jesus is the Lord of life. Even in death, those who die believing in Jesus Christ are not dead but have everlasting life. Jesus said to Martha, as he ministered to her in her grief, "Martha, I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." These words, "I am the Resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me shall never die" are all that we need to hear from this story. Jesus is the Lord of life. Those who believe in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Jesus came into the world not to condemn the world but to save the world. This is bedrock Christianity.

We are now in the fifth week of the season of Lent. We began the season on Ash Wednesday, and those of you in church that evening received the imposition of ashes with these words, which I think most of you remember. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return." A part of the aging process is that as we grow older, these words take on greater and greater meaning. Our awareness of the proximity of death grows greater day by day. No one escapes death. Lazarus did not escape death. Lazarus might have lived longer, but the death sentence was not overturned, it was simply stayed.

For the Christian though, death is not the final answer. We have the promise of Jesus that in him, though our bodies will be destroyed – though we will indeed return to dust, our souls will live on. Resurrection is assured for those who are followers of the Savior. This is the heart of Christian doctrine. Saint Paul said that if there is no resurrection then we are fools and our hope is in vane. I would add to that and say that those who deny eternal life in Christ deny any meaning for life. An early, 7th Century English theologian and historian, known as the Venerable Bede, once said this about Christian belief in eternal life. He said that to imagine life without Christ, you should imagine a great wooden hall in the countryside, alone in the darkness of an English bog during a winter night. Not a star shining in the sky, no glow of the moon, no light from other buildings. The hall stands in total darkness, except for light from two open windows on either side of the hall. Inside, the hall is lit brightly, as for a banquet. Now, imagine a bird, flying in the darkness. Attracted to the light, the bird flies into an open window and immediately, startled and frightened, it flies out the opposite window. Bede said that life without Christ is analogous to that bird: eternal darkness interrupted by a fleeting moment of

light. Without Christ, we are born of nothing and return to nothing, and life, so brief, has no meaning. You can whitewash the Christian doctrine, but if you remove the hope of eternal life in Christ, there is nothing left.

Our season of Lent is drawing to a close. Today is the fifth Sunday. Next Sunday is the last. In two weeks we celebrate the greatest day in the Church year and the greatest event in the entirety of history, the Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord, Easter Day. Let us look forward, in joy to the celebration of our Lord's Resurrection and pray for sustained faith that we may also experience resurrection and eternal life in Him. *Amen.*