



COME & SEE
NEW LIFE

We're in a worship series entitled "Come and See". We're exploring the stories of Jesus' encounters with ordinary people, to discover how these encounters changed them. But this isn't just about learning what happened in the past. These stories dare us to believe that our daily encounters with Jesus can change us too. And then we're encouraged to invite others to come and see and be changed. See how that works? We come and see Jesus. We are changed. And so, we invite others to come and see. Look around you right now. See those empty chairs? They are waiting for someone, someone whom you will invite to come and see Jesus. That's how we share the life and goodness of Jesus.

Today we're going to explore the story of Jesus raising Lazarus. It's a long story, found in John 11:1-7, 17-44 [NLT]. Because it's a long story we're going to read it in a creative way. As we hear this story I want you to pay attention to three things: heartache, miracle and invitation. Here we go...

Amazing story, isn't it? And it raises so many questions. Why did Jesus just stay where he was when he learned that his beloved friend Lazarus was deathly ill? Why did Jesus let him die rather than heal him? So many perplexing questions. But rather than focus on what we don't know in this story, let's focus on what we do – the three things I asked you to pay attention to: heartache, new life and unwrapping.

Let's start with heartache. There's a lot of it in this story. Can you imagine the suffering and the fear of Lazarus as he grew sicker and weaker? Can you imagine the grief of Mary and Martha as they watched their brother grow sicker and eventually die? And their heartache is only intensified at knowing that Jesus delayed coming to Lazarus. "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died!" You can hear the disappointment and hurt in those words. And even Jesus suffers heartache in this story, weeping at his friend's grave. This story is filled with heartache.

But then there's new life. Jesus raises Lazarus to new life, just as he promised. Martha thought that Jesus was referring to the promised resurrection of all at the end of time, but Jesus meant something more, something more immediate, something that makes a difference in the here and now. And John wants us to know that this was indeed a miracle and not a mistake. He tells us several times that Lazarus had been dead for four days. The Rabbi's taught that the spirit of a dead man hovered over the body for three days and then departed. This is John's way of telling us the Lazarus isn't merely dead. He's really dead. Totally beyond hope.

But despite the fact that Lazarus has been dead for four days, and despite Martha's concern about the stench, they obey Jesus' request to roll away the stone and Jesus calls Lazarus forth with a loud voice, as if awakening him from a deep sleep. And to everyone's amazement the dead man walks. He walks right out of the tomb and stands before the crowd of mourners. Can you imagine their stunned silence?

And then there's the unwrapping. Did you catch it? Lazarus stands at the mouth of tomb wrapped tight in his grave clothes. And Jesus invites the community to unwrap him and let him go. What an odd detail. Jesus could have unwrapped Lazarus himself, or simply commanded the grave clothes to fall away. But he didn't. He invited the community to both witness and participate in this miracle.

Heartache. New Life. Unwrapping. It's all there in the story of Jesus raising Lazarus.

But I want to suggest to you that that's not all. Not even close. If you read the Gospel of John you learn early on that the meaning of every story lies below the surface. If we take these stories at face value we miss what John desperately wants us to know.

You see, at the very beginning of the Gospel John tells us that in Jesus light and life have come into the world. And at the end of the Gospel John tells us that the purpose of his Gospel is that we might come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that in believing we might have abundant life. Real life. Fullness of life. Right here and right now. Which is why we need to scratch below the surface of this story, because if it's merely about the fact that Jesus raised a man named Lazarus from death 2000 years ago... well, that's very interesting, but not very impactful for you

and me, right here and right now. But I want to suggest to you that there is more. Much more.

Notice a few details. The story takes place in Bethany, which means “House of the Afflicted”. Lazarus’ name is a shortened form of Eleazar, which means “God helps”. And Lazarus is referred to as “the one whom Jesus loves.” Do you see what John is doing? John wants us to see ourselves as Lazarus. In other words, this isn’t just a story about Lazarus; it’s a story about us.

We are the ones who live in the “house of the afflicted”. We are a people who are intimately familiar with heartache. We are people who are in desperate need of God’s help. And we are the ones whom Jesus loves. You and I are Lazarus, dead in our sin, deadened by fear, guilt, shame, disappointment. We are a people in need of the miracle of new life every day.

And that is exactly what John wants us to dare to believe... that Jesus has come into this world to raise us from death. Not just at the end but right here and right now. When we believe in Jesus, when we entrust ourselves to Jesus, Jesus breathes new life into our deadness. He transforms our fear into peace. Our guilt and shame into the joy of knowing that we are forgiven and loved. Our disappointment is transformed into hope and new beginning. Jesus calls us out of our tombs with the clear call of his Word...which is why we need to read it every day!

And then you and I are invited to not only experience this miracle, but to witness it in the lives of one another. We’re invited to unwrap one another from our grave clothes, to help one another to take off the old life of fear, guilt, shame and disappointment and to live into the new life of peace, forgiveness, love and hope. That’s what we get to do as the community of faith, the body of Christ.

So what does all that look like in real life?

It looks like the addict who is dead in their addiction. Hopeless and helpless. But Jesus calls that addict to new life through the Twelve Steps. The addict admits that her life has become unmanageable. She entrusts herself to a higher power that she dares to believe can set her free. And Jesus breathes new life into her! But then there’s this community of people around her who help to unwrap her from her grave clothes. To untangle her life from old ways of being, from “stinkin’ thinkin’” and the places and people who would seek to draw her back into the darkness of death and addiction. And by God’s grace, day by day, she rises to newness of life. Right here and right now.

Not long ago I was on Facebook and saw a picture of someone with whom I’d had a lot of conflict years ago. And in a heartbeat, I was bound up in the death of bitterness, choked to death by my grudge. But I heard Jesus call in that moment to entrust myself to Him. So I laid it all out with Jesus in prayer. I asked for a new heart, one that beat with forgiveness and compassion. And He did. In that moment Jesus gave me a new heart, which felt like new life. And I shared that experience with a trusted friend who, with encouragement and a listening ear, helped to unwrap me from those things that bind me.

Do you see how this works? You and I are Lazarus. You and I are the ones whom Jesus loves. And every time we find ourselves dead in sin and the heartache of this world, we listen for the voice of the One who calls us to newness of life. And that’s just what Jesus does. And then we live in community, helping to unwrap one another from the old things that bind us, so we might live into the new life of Christ.

Too often we’ve assumed that this faith of ours is little more than an insurance policy for the life to come, but it’s so much more. It’s about Jesus who meets us here and now in our deadness and brokenness and raises us to new life. Heartache, new life, unwrapping. That’s the story of Lazarus. And that’s our story. Let’s live it and invite others to come and see.