

My Name is Lazarus

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The resurrected King is resurrecting me. Now you think about that statement. The first part of it is objective. You cannot like it but you can't argue with it because the King of kings raised from the dead three days after they put him in the grave. You can't argue with that. That is objective. That is fact. That is historical. The second statement is subjective. The resurrected King is resurrecting me. We can't debate or discuss whether or not he raised, the question we've got to ask today is: have we been raised? Objective truth has occurred. In just a few moments, it's going to get personal. Have you been raised? Have you been resurrected? Or is there something in your life that needs to be resurrected? Here is the good news: that because he did, so can you. Because he was raised, you can be raised.

Let's pray.

Lord, as we come to this time, help us not to argue with the facts, help us not to debate what is truth, but help us to take those facts and to take the truth of your word and to apply it into our own personal struggles and issues and doubts and questions. Lord, we know, we know that the King has been resurrected, help us, O God, now to allow the same King to resurrect us. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the Gospel of John 11. As you're turning to John 11, you're going to discover one of the most famous stories, one of the most famous instances in the ministry and the life of Jesus Christ. Today is the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead and in the Lord's providence not only do we study this passage today but you and I are at a very critical historical moment for it is this week 500 years ago that a small and somewhat frail German monk went up to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany, a place where announcements were given not just to the church but to the community, he placed those famous 95 theses, 95 statements about what was wrong with and needed to be changed with what we know as the church of Jesus Christ. And what we discover when we look back 500 years in time, is that the church as an institution, the church as an entity, the church collective, was dead and dying and it was raised from the dead 500 years ago this week.

Now in just a moment we're going to read the story of an actual man who was raised from the dead. We're going to use that as a parallel to see what happened significantly 500 years ago this week, the church collective, but I also want to make a statement and

ask a question today. We are Lazarus. You see, we're going to discover today that we as individuals and we corporately as the body of Christ, we have a tendency to allow ourselves to get in the same position that Lazarus was in and so the question we have to ask ourselves today being that we are Lazarus is: are we going to allow the Lord to call us forth?

In John 11, beginning in verse 38, Jesus is about to respond to Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus. They are distraught. Why is this Jesus who they saw walk across the water, or at least had heard about it, the same Jesus that they experienced the multiplication of the food, the same Jesus who two other people he touched and raised from the dead, why was their brother allowed to remain dead? Why was their brother still in the grave four days later? We pick up the story in verse 38. It says,

38 Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it. 39 Jesus said, Take away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, said unto him, [and by the way, one of my favorite lines in all of the Bible] Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he has been dead four days. 40 Jesus saith unto her, Said I not unto you, that, if thou would believe, you should see the glory of God? 41 Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. 42 And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that you have sent me. 43 And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth.

Now as we look at this story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, as we see the parallel not only in history some five centuries ago this week, but even in our own lives, three very obvious things that I want to explore. The first is the issue of death. We have a dead man in the grave. The second is the issue of decomposition. He is not only dead, by this time he's really dead and decomposition has settled in. And then finally, the diagnosis. The issue of when Jesus shows up on the scene and this famous statement, "Lazarus, come forth."

Now let's speak about the issue of death. Lazarus, it cannot be questions, it cannot be debated, he's dead. Everybody knows he's dead. His family knows he's dead. The community knows he's dead. There is no arguing here, the guy is dead. Now, these subpoints here, I know some of you are going to think, "That is so elementary. That is so trite." But I want you to think with me for just a moment. When something is dead or somebody is dead and in particular when Lazarus is dead, there are three things that are no longer present: there is no life; there is no movement; and there is no influence. Now work with me for just a moment. We get the "no life" part. He hasn't breathed a breath of oxygen in four days. His body at this point, rigor mortis is settling in and things are beginning to happen. There is no life and there is no movement. This same man who just a week earlier was walking to and fro, this same man who was sitting at dinner tables, this same man who went out into the community and had an occupation, movement has ceased and influence has stopped. A man of influence. His sisters are distraught over his

passing, the disciples are distraught over his passing and in just one more chapter, an entire community is going to be enthralled with his testimony because of not only the influence of his being raised from the dead but the person that he was prior to.

So Lazarus' death is one who used to have an abundance of life, an abundance of movement, and most likely an incredible amount of influence in his family and in his community. Allow me to make the parallel to 500 years ago this week. What we know as the entity, the church, the governments, the structures thereof, for all intents and purposes had died. It no longer had life that it used to have. We could go on for hours about one very simple example. And by the way, if you look at Martin Luther's 95 theses, the number one issue he had was with indulgences. If you're not familiar with what an indulgence is, it gives you the opportunity to either pay with money, to pay with prayers, or to pay with your time – listen for this – forgiveness of sin in advance of actually committing it. In other words, your buddies from school are coming in town and you're going to have a wild weekend. So you go down to the church, you give a sum of money and you can live guilt free in all of your debauchery. The life of Jesus Christ was no longer present. In fact, the church had become more about, "What can I get out of it than what Jesus can place into me?"

The church also had ceased to move. This same church that began in Jerusalem and went to Judea and Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth, everything had been reversed. You see, 500 years ago statements couldn't be made, decisions couldn't be made unless it came from Rome. That was the place that it had to happen. So no longer was the church going forth with the Gospel – listen – everybody was expected to turn to one specific location and one specific man for direction on anything.

And its influence had died as well. That which had turned the world upside down, that which had changed both lands and countries, now was this bureaucratic mess of rules, regulations, authority, power, and unfortunately not the influence of the Gospel but the influence of the world. It looked more like the world than it did Jesus.

Allow me to parallel our world today for, after all, we're going to discover that we are Lazarus. You know, the church today collectively is experiencing a death. You may not be aware of this and as I'm about to share with you in a moment, you're a blessed people. We're in the land of Goshen right here. Do you know what Goshen is? Goshen was the place in the Old Testament during the plagues where while everybody else was suffering, the peace of God, the light of God, the favor of God, was upon. In other words, let me give you an example. Did you know, and some of you that were here last week, you hear this particularly, that at least within what we know as this body collectively denominationally bigger than just this one place, that baptisms that mark what you saw observed today, that thing which demonstrates on the outside what has happened on the inside, it is a picture of salvation that we are now baptizing numerically the same number of people we baptized 60 years ago even though the population has doubled.

Now we're living in Goshen because we had the opportunity on this campus within this body in the last 12 months to see over 110 people proclaim faith in Jesus Christ but did

you know that collectively across the country the number of baptisms has declined every year for 10 years? Death has settled in once again and movement has ceased. I mean, you think about what the early church was commissioned to do, to go, go make disciples, go unto all nations. We are more interested now in seeing how many people we can get in one room in the seats than how many feet we can put in the streets. We've become what we came out of 500 years ago.

And influence has died as well. Do you want to know the influence that the church, the body of Christ used to have? I'll give you a little assignment here, a little homework. It's not hard to do. When you exit the campus today both in this city and in other cities near us, just take some time to drive through the downtown area. That's all you have to do for it doesn't matter if it's a small community or a large community, hundreds of years ago when we settled communities, at the crossroads of town do you know what we had? We had a Methodist church. We had a Presbyterian church. And we had two Baptist churches. Why? Because Baptists like to fight. They split, they had two. But we had churches. Just exit our campus today and drive through downtown and what are you going to see? You're going to see a Methodist church, a Presbyterian church, a Baptist church. In fact, one of the largest cities we have in this country, the area I'm from, the Dallas/ Fort Worth area, a city that claims over 5 million residents, yet if you go to the original cross section of what we know as Dallas, Texas, guess what you find? A Methodist church, a Presbyterian church, a Baptist church, and an Episcopal church. They have four. Drive up to Atlanta, Georgia, drive to any city, New York, Philadelphia, Boston, go to them and what do you discover? You discover that the body of Christ, the church of Jesus Christ was so influential that it was at the center – listen – of people's lives. And now what has happened? Kind of the trend today is we take "physical buildings" know as churches, and we stick them out as far as we can in the suburbs to hopefully catch people as they pass by. It's more than buildings, it's more than latitude and longitude, it's the church of Jesus Christ is rarely today the center of one's life, the influencer of their life. In fact to be quite honest with you, it's rarely considered by most.

Lazarus was dead. Five hundred years ago the church collective was dead. We may not be far off today. The second issue, though, is decomposition and I know this is kind of a morbid term but I want you to look back in verse 39 and this is, and I've already looked at one of my favorite statements in all of the Bible, because Jesus said, "Take away the stone." In other words, what he has in his mind is that which is dead is now going to be brought to life; that which has ceased to move is going to move again; that which has no influence is now going to be influential. And what is the response? "But, Lord, he stinketh." In other words, Lazarus' death did not just occur the night before. In fact, the Bible declares that for four days he had been dead. It was progressive. The decomposition that had begun to settle in, it had been going on for four days.

Now a couple of years ago I had the opportunity, I was speaking with a mortician about the different ways in which we can be buried and laid to rest. And some of you may or may not be familiar with this but you can actually today have what is called a green burial. In other words, there is no formaldehyde, there is no embalming fluid, there are no special substances. To be honest with you, they just drop you in the ground and let you

go, okay? Here's what's interesting, did you know that a "green" burial will cost you just as much as a normal one because of all the permits you've got to get to be buried that way? But number 2, did you know the interesting thing about a "green" burial is you'd better have your family on call because you have to be put in the ground within 72 hours. Why? Because the body begins to decompose and over a series of time, what happens, the cellular structure and those things that give us shape and definition and rigidity is all of a sudden no longer.

What we discover about Lazarus is he was beginning the process, he had been gone for four days, it was progressive. He was decomposing and what happened? According to his sister, it was putrid. It stunk.

You know, maybe it's just because I have three teenage boys in my home but I identify with this verse. I understand what decomposition smells like. I mean, think about this for a moment, Jesus says, "Roll away the stone." And I'm going to tell you a story this morning. It's about one of my sons. I'm not going to tell you who it is but he has two little brothers. One of my sons, a couple of weeks ago we discovered that he had left a pair of athletic shoes in the car overnight. We drew straws who was going to open the door. Well, he that leaves it, must go get it as far as I'm concerned. But, boy, when the door to the car was opened, I mean, it just hit you. I mean, it was putrid. Can you imagine what the sister of Lazarus is trying to avoid here? Can you imagine how putrid it would actually smell?

Lazarus also was petrified. You know what petrification is, it's now a substance that reminds us of what used to be that which is now hard and dead that used to be alive. He is no longer what he used to be. This man abounding with energy, this man full of wisdom, this man who was a friend and family member, now all of a sudden has a body that is beginning to lose it's shape, it's beginning, to use his sister's words, to stink, and all it is is a picture of what it used to be.

Five hundred years ago this week, the same story, second verse, for in 1517 when Martin Luther went to that church in Wittenberg, what he had discovered is not only the death of but the decomposition of. The conditions of which he found of the indulgences and all the misappropriations of the things of God, it didn't begin the day before, the year before, even the century before, in fact it had begun over 1,000 years before. In the fourth century, then the entity known as Rome declared – listen to this – declared that Christianity would be the official religion of Rome. Do you see a problem with that statement? Jesus did not come to start a religion, he came to institute a relationship and when you declare a relationship a religion, you might as well get out the death certificate because the church collectively died. It began to look like the world, act like the world, be governed like and by the world. In fact it got so bad that the world began to declare who would be the pastor, who would be the bishop, who would be the leaders. The world was now telling the "church" how to operate.

It was progressive. I mentioned about 1,000 years or so worth. You know, anytime I get a skeptic, an atheist, an agnostic, a just in general hater of the things of God in his word,

usually one of the excuses they bring to me is the atrocities that have been done in the name of the church, the wars that have been started, the lives that have been taken, the scandals that have been wrought. Did you know historically most of those happened between the 4th and the 16th century? About 1,200 years leading up to this famous event known as the Reformation.

It was progressive and it was putrid in the sense of the fact that the people of Martin Luther's day turned their nose at what we know as the church because they only reason they would go to church is to pay a tax that the government told them they had to pay. The only reason they went to the church is to go to an event or do something the world say you have to do. No longer was the church a place to relate with Jesus Christ. It was a place of the state and its involvement and dictating what you will and what you will not do and what makes you good and what makes you bad. Check off the box and that, my friends, stinks no matter how you look at it.

And it was petrified. The church no longer looked like, acted like, and spoke like it used to be. I mean, think about the book of Acts for just a moment. Acts 2, the Holy Spirit comes down and 3,000 people were saved. They get so excited about it, they begin to sell stuff to help out the new believers. You get to Acts 17, there is a man by the name of Jason. He is not a pastor. He is not an elder. He is not a deacon. He is not a bishop. He has no title at all and yet they say that because of his Christian influence, the world was being turned upside down. Acts 26, the Apostle Paul because there were lost people on this island, on a boat said, "Raise the sail. Crash the boat. It is worth losing the boat to save the souls." That church was no more. In fact, the church of Martin Luther's day was selling souls to build bigger boats. In other words, it was petrified.

Lest we throw the proverbial stone at the glass wall of history, maybe today we are Lazarus. Do you think that the church of Jesus Christ today as a collective body is not what it used to be and we could debate this for hours, but let me just go back about 50 or 60 years when we got so smart, in fact, we were as brilliant as we were in the garden of Eden when we decided, at least in this context and culture, that man's opinion, humanistic understanding and reason and popular consensus was more important than the word of God. And when we started doing that and started elevating anything and everything above the word of God, the process and the progression of decomposition began to settle in. Let me give you some insight here: it stinks. It's putrid.

How many people have you had conversations with about the things of God, the person of Jesus, even "the church" and they turn up their nose more than they get interested or excited? Because we thanks to even in our context today, we have begun to decompose. We've begun to stink and we're petrified. In other words, we're a memory. We're a monument to what we used to be.

Let me give you just a little case study here. One hundred years ago, a man, an evangelist by the name of Billy Sunday. Did you know that those who owned places of ill repute, those that owned the bars in those days, would close them down when they knew he was coming because they would be closed by the time he left. Just go ahead and get it over

with. And you go back in time and you study the Great Awakenings and the great revivals and I've got news for anybody and everybody: with the exception of two of them, every one of our Ivy League institutions were established as seminaries for the training of men to share the Gospel of Jesus with the world. Today, those same institutions are some of the leading antagonists toward the things of God.

We have become petrified. We're no longer a place of awakening. We're no longer a place of revival. We're no longer a place where the things of God are at the center of our life. They are only – listen – they are only paid attention to when nothing else will satisfy. We've become petrified.

Now, enough of all the bad news. Let me give you some good news. Jesus is in John 11. Lazarus is not just dying and decomposing on his own but Jesus shows up and here's the diagnosis. Jesus comes and when he does, I love these words, "Lazarus, come forth." Can you imagine if he had left off his first name? Have you ever thought about that for just a moment? What if Jesus had gone to the cemetery and said, "Come forth"? Do you realize the resurrection would have occurred because everybody would have raised? But what we discover is that it was the person of Jesus who raised Lazarus from the dead. It wasn't religion, it wasn't rite, it wasn't ritual, it wasn't a series of hoops to jump through. It was the person of Jesus. You see, when we substitute the relationship with Jesus for religion, we end up with something that is dead versus something that is alive. Only Jesus has the ability to raise from the dead that which has ceased to live.

But there is a product as well. You say, "Well, what product?" The word of God. You see, Jesus is God Incarnate. He's Jesus and Jesus is God in flesh and when he says, "Lazarus, come forth," what we understand is that it is the word of God that has the ability to raise that which is dead unto life again. That is why when you look at the Reformation, it was in Christ alone, by Scripture alone, through faith alone.

You see, it's not just the person of Jesus, it's not just the product of the word of God, but I want you to notice the process. Look in verse 40, "Jesus said unto her, Said I not unto you, that, if you would believe," then he prays to his Father thanking him that because of his belief in the situation others will come to understand and to believe. And what happened 500 years ago, is that it had ceased to be about the person of Jesus, it had ceased to be about the word of God, and it ceased to be about faith, but 500 years ago this week, a small little German monk said, "It's time to get back to Jesus. It's time to get back to the word of God. It's time to get back to 'by grace through faith alone and not of works, lest any man should boast.'"

I don't think I can do history justice this morning describing how impactful that event was, but I want to show you a small video clip in just a minute. This is a clip from a movie that we're going to show in this room tonight at 5 o'clock. This is a movie about the life and the impact of Martin Luther. This is not 1517 church at Wittenberg, in fact we're going to fast forward 4 years, this is 1521. This is the Diet of Worms and Martin Luther has been given an ultimatum to take what he is preaching and to recant. He has gone against the institution, he has gone against the beast of this entity, and he's been

asked to change his mind. Five hundred years ago this week, this is what changed everything. Through Christ alone, based on Scripture alone, by faith alone. It's not something that Martin Luther discovered or invented, it was the message of Jesus that he recaptured and maybe today it's a message you need recaptured as well.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. Maybe you're that person today who realized maybe for the very first time that the words of Scripture, the teachings of Jesus, the life of Jesus isn't about joining a religion, it's about entering into a relationship. And maybe today you realize it's not about how much you can accomplish or how much bad you can cease from doing, but it's about what Jesus has done in your stead and on your behalf. I've got some great news, you don't have to sign up for a bunch of classes, you don't have to jump through a bunch of hoops, you just need to have a very serious conversation with God. You don't have to have this conversation out loud, you don't even have to say the same words that I might say, but maybe your conversation would go a little something like this. "God, today I just want to confess, I want to confess that I've seen it all from the wrong perspective. God, I thought somehow, some way, I could be good enough to earn your favor. I thought somehow, some way, I could stop doing some stuff and somehow that would make me clean in your eyes. But I realize today it's not about what I do or stop doing, it's about what Jesus has done on my behalf. Lord, I want to confess that I've got a sin problem that no amount of my energy or labor or money will ever be able to solve and I understand today that Jesus is the only one who can solve it. I believe that Jesus loved me so much that he was willing to come on my behalf. I believe Jesus loved me so much he was willing to live a sinless life on my behalf. I believe Jesus loved me so much he was willing to bear the price and the pain of the cross and three days later raise from the dead so I could be forgiven and I could be saved. Lord, today I don't have all the answers to the world's problems but I know that Jesus is the answer to my sin problem and so I'm asking you to save me, I'm asking you to forgive me. In the best way I know how, I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, if that's a conversation you had with God today, we'd love to have a conversation with you. We just want to celebrate what God is doing in your life. And maybe today is that day of salvation and forgiveness or maybe today is that day that you as a believer having lived some years or decades in a relationship with Christ realize that maybe it's become more religion than relationship, and maybe today is the day that you allow the Lord to remove the shackles of religion and you walk in the freedom of relationship. Whatever it is the Lord has done or is doing in your life, we just want to celebrate with you.

Lord, as we come to this opportunity, Lord, how good it is to know that in our rebellion and in our religion, that you're not satisfied; that you were not only willing to come and to give of yourself for us, but you're willing even now to continue to extend your grace and your mercy. Lord, I pray that we would no longer have the eyes of the world and the ears of religion but we would have the eyes and the ears of a relationship with you through Jesus Christ. Help us, O God, to maybe for the first time or to once again see what it's really all about. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

I'm going to ask at this time if you would, stand with me as our team leads us. Any decision, I'll be here at the front.