



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE”

Scripture Lessons: Jonah 3:1-11; John 11:32-44

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, November 1, 2020  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

John 11:32-44

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’ But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?’

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?’ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, ‘Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.’ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Most people don't like to talk about death; after all we're talking about the end of an earthly life, and even when we know that the person's life may have felt the full brunt of pain and suffering, and even when death may seem to us to be a merciful transition, we're still talking about losing someone. Often times someone we love, when someone dies, we lose not only something of the past and the present, but we also lose something of the future as well, those hoped for experiences and memories. They will not be remembered because they will not have happened, and that can break our hearts. On this All Saints Sunday, and when Dr. Rogers a little bit later in the service in his part of the pastoral prayer, speaks those names out loud, my guess is that particularly for some people, some here perhaps, some worshipping at home, some of those names will be very difficult to hear because they were people close to you.

Sometimes we avoid the topic of death because it has a way of reminding us of just how precious and fragile life really is. Perhaps it serves as a reminder of our own mortality, and we just as soon focus on life like the old African American spiritual "I Ain't Got Time to Die," we divert our attention to the things that we can do something about. We know that there's a time to be born, and a time to die, but now is the time, it's time to live. But alas, we will not live forever; we all know this at least not on this side of heaven.

I've always appreciated Emily Dickinson's poem entitled "Death." Listen to this stanza:  
Because I could not stop for Death –  
He kindly stopped for me –  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –  
And Immortality.

Now to be clear, while death does stop for all of us, for the Christian, our conversation doesn't stop with death because death does not have the last word, our Savior has assured us of that. In fact, the only way we can talk about the mystery of death rightly is when we also talk about the light of eternity. The Bible declares this: "Where O death is your victory, where O death is your sting?" Those questions are weighty, and they are poignant; they are relevant. They are also heartbreakingly hopeful because they remind us that precisely because of God's redemptive work in Jesus Christ our Lord, death does not mark the sunset on our earthly life as much as it marks the dawn of our new life lived eternally with God. And in this miracle of God, it applies to everything under the sun, no matter how dead or lifeless something may appear to be, God can make of it something whole, something beautiful, something alive.

Even ancient Israel knew this. There was a time when as a nation Israel was like a valley of dry bones. That's hard for us to imagine, I know. God's people, chosen by God to embody streams of righteousness, dried up like a parched riverbed, but they were. They wondered if there was for them any future at all. "Our bones are dried up," they said, "our hope is lost, we are cut off completely." Yet God revealed through the Prophet Ezekiel that by his word and his spirit, God would bring life out of death, and those dry bones would live again.

Jonah, he too knew something about God's miraculous power to bring hope to an otherwise hopeless situation. The people of God, the people of Nineveh, I should say, were working in the sight of God, and their evil ways were known near and far, but most notably they were known by God. And like Israel, Nineveh was dying spiritually, and she would die physically as well, if she did not turn to God. Jonah entered that city and preached a call of repentance, and amazingly enough those people, "More than 120,000 who did not know their right hand from their left," the Bible tells us, they turned to God, and they were granted a future where there didn't seem to be any future before. But isn't that the nature of God's love, to engage our present circumstances and to redefine them in light of God's eternal promises?

Consider the story of Lazarus, the second part of which we read this morning, but consider if you will in light of the story of Jesus. What I mean is this, when we hear that story about how Lazarus was dead in the tomb for four days, and that it was a cave, and that there was a stone lying against it, and the stone was removed and Lazarus was raised from the dead, that sounds very familiar doesn't it? Certainly reasonable for us to make the connection between the hope of

those two sisters that was met in the raising of Lazarus and the hopes of the world that were met in the raising of Jesus. How it is that Jesus gives life to Lazarus in one story and how Jesus gives life to all those who have put their trust in him, in another.

So what if the story of Lazarus is not so much a story about a family grieving the loss of a loved one as it is a story about a world caught in the grip of sin and death. If the latter is the case, then that would imply that there are people for whom this world feels like a cemetery, people for whom living looks and sounds more like dying, and the truth is, whether we think we know people like that or not, we do. They're all around us, and many of those people can be counted among the faithful people of God.

We sometimes forget that Lazarus was Jesus' friend; he was a follower. His sisters, Mary and Martha, they too loved the Lord; they believed he was the Messiah. Even the people of God can feel hurt and broken and alone, but notice the extent to which Jesus empathizes with that very real sense of pain and loss, that oft referenced Bible trivia question, the shortest verse in the Bible. We have it right here, "Jesus wept," or as the New Revised Standard version puts it, "Jesus began to weep." See, Jesus loved Lazarus, and if we persist in making the connection between this story and the far more important story of Jesus' own death and resurrection, then we are left to wonder if when Jesus wept he did not also weep for the brokenness of the world.

Some years ago, my mother told me of a time when my uncle preached on the story of Lazarus. He was serving as a pastor in Atlanta, Georgia and he looked out on that congregation, he said with his refined southern loud drawl, "Lazarus come out," and he went on, "It's a good thing Jesus called Lazarus by name because had he not, the whole cemetery would have walked out of their grave clothes that day." Sounds like a good Baptist southern preacher to me.

Truth is, Jesus does call out Lazarus, nevertheless, he calls out the whole of the world, the whole of humanity, "Come out, come out you who are called by my Father in heaven, you who are weary in carrying heavy burdens, come out of your death, your dying in despair, and live again. "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus says, "those who believe in me even though they die will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Albeit, the dry bones of Israel, to the sinful city of Nineveh, the story of Lazarus, these very words of Christ to be certain, that the breadth and scope of the biblical witness, it reveals that wherever God is, there is life, even in those places where there doesn't seem to be any life at all.

I know there are times when we feel like we are finished and done, as if the final word has been spoken. We may feel constrained by our own brand of the burial cloth, and we may feel as though God neglects our prayers. We may feel all but forsaken; Jesus knew that feeling as well, and Jesus went to the depths of that place so that we wouldn't have to, and because Jesus rose again, he can say to us with a blessed authority, "Come out," but not only come out, but also this, "unbind him, unbind her, and let them go."

So what about your life or mine needs to be unbound? What despair is it that causes us to forget that the Saints of God are not some postmortem memory, but they remain for us even now, a great cloud of witnesses? What is it that so constrains those of us who live on this side of heaven and makes us nearly dead to the new life that God calls us to enjoy? Is it a past that cannot be

changed? Is it a schedule we cannot keep? Is it a loved one we cannot forgive? Is it a coronavirus that scares us, an election that that worries us?

Friends, these things represent the kind of burdens, the kind of times in which, we as the children of God, were never intended to reside. The truth be known, it is never too late for us to hear and believe Jesus' words of healing and hope, to follow God's light out of our darkness and to come out like Lazarus did before us and to live. At times, the future may seem bleak. Our Savior conquered the world, and Jesus having left his burial cloths, those strips he left behind, he invites us to do the same thing...come out, unbind him, unbind her and let them go. Praise be to God we are free; we are freed in the living love of our Redeemer to nourish our souls, to share in Christ's victory over death, and to have life and life abundant, not only now, but by God's grace forevermore.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

\*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.