

Pastor: During the season of Lent, we have these long and thick stories from the Gospel of John. Today, today's Gospel is from John, the eleventh chapter. The story of the raising of Lazarus. Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, in the village of Mary, and her sister, Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair. Her brother, Lazarus, was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus. "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, He said, "This illness does not lead to death, rather, it is for God's glory." He stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this, he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and you're going there again?" Jesus told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to waken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he's fallen asleep, he'll be all right." Jesus however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there so you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go so that we may die with him." When Jesus arrived, He found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of Him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection, on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me even though they die, will live. And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the One coming in to the world." When she had said this, she went back and called her sister, Mary. When Mary came to where Jesus was and saw Him, she knelt at His feet and she said to Him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, Jesus 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." And some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind have kept this man from dying?" Then Jesus again, greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and the stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there's a stench because he's been dead 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 upward, and He said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I've said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." And when He had said this, He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And 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. Let him go." Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in Him. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Audience: Thanks be to God.

- One of my roles as a pastor, as a religious expert, a theologian, is occasionally to burst somebody's spiritual bubble. Some of you may have had this experience with me. Some layman comes in and tells me that he has received some nocturnal vision of Jesus, and I am forced as a learned theologian to have him reconsider. Perhaps his vision was a result of a night of Italian food. Someone says to me, "I have witnessed a miracle!" And I respond, "In Durham?" (crowd chuckles) Give me a break! We have too many means of explaining weird events for you to have gotten a miracle. I took an introductory course in Old Testament when I was in college. We were studying the book of Exodus. The Hebrews are free from slavery, they're out in the desert, but their food runs out, they've got nothing to eat. And they pray to God, and one morning they come out, and there is this white, flakey, this manna out there on the ground. They gather up the manna, they make it into bread, and thus, they are preserved. Well, we had never seen anything like this in South Carolina. What could this be? Well luckily we had a professor there to explain it to us. He told us that there was this professor somewhere who had found out that in the Near East there is this beetle that secretes this substance from its body, and when this dries, it turns a kind of white, flaky substance. And then it was found that if you would ingest these bug droppings, that they had a sort of sweet taste. Now it did take away a little bit from the story (audience chuckles) to realize that these Hebrews had sustained themselves on bug droppings, but I was impressed, it did make the story easier to take after it had been explained to us. And scientifically, too. Although you had to wonder, these Jews, they couldn't tell the difference between a miracle of God and bug droppings? Well in today's gospel, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. And things like this just don't happen every day here in Durham. What are we to make of so weird a story? Well, here comes then the Jesus seminar. These scholars remind us that John's Gospel is a very late gospel. This story is not told in any of the other gospels. There's a lot of material in John's Gospel of dubious origin. That is, made up. Jesus was not some kind of primitive miracle worker, says professor Borg, he was a first century Gallilean sage, who said a number of interesting things, but didn't actually do that much that can be historically verified. Therefore, relax. Now, the trouble is, as I admitted to those of you who were here last Sunday, in my attempt to relieve you of anxiety that you may have felt when you watched Jesus heal a blind man, as I have admitted, as a pastor I have witnessed enough of these weird inexplicable phenomena to learn to be a little slower about dismissing these things out of hand simply because they do not appear to occur every day in Durham. Well it is a rich, too rich story. This wonderful, long story of the raising of Lazarus. I can't do justice to all of it, but I just want to call your attention to one part of the story. That is the very end of the story. At the very end, Lazarus is not only resuscitated, but I noticed the reaction of the onlookers to this. Jesus goes out to the tomb of Lazarus, and in a voice loud enough to wake the dead, He shouts "Lazarus, come out!" And this mummy-looking corpse appears, and then Jesus shouts, "Unbind him! Let him go!" And there, the once-dead Lazarus stands before them, alive. I do lots of funerals as a pastor, and what a grieving family would give, just about everything, I expect, to be able to call, as Mary and Martha did, on someone who would come out, say a few words, loud words, and restore their loved one to life. And that makes, perhaps all the more strange, the reaction to the raising of Lazarus. The reaction to this event, at least on the part of the good Bible-believing religious experts, is not joy, it's not celebration, it is a determination to get organized and finally put Jesus to death. Mary and Martha are just thrilled to have their brother back. But the theologians are less than thrilled. In fact, in verses right after this, John says that after this event, after the raising of Lazarus, that this set in motion a process that led directly to the arrest and the crucifixion of Jesus. The disciples warned Jesus not to go out to the cemetery there, to Lazarus's tomb. You'll die. Now the other gospels say that Jesus got in to trouble for different reasons. It was His anti-

establishment attitude. It was conflict with the governmental and religious authorities. It was His advocacy for the poor that landed Jesus in hot water. But it's interesting that John says the thing that really got people were these signs. It was the raising of the dead that got Jesus nailed to a cross. Why? What's bad about this outbreak of life? Well, everything, apparently. What do we do, what do we do, when we get some sign of the glory of God? Some sign in the midst of ordinary life? Our interpretive machinery starts to crank and rumble. We explain, we historicize. These were primitive scientific Jews, unlike us smart, know-it-all, modern people. They were gullible, they would believe in someone coming back from the dead. Or we psychologize. We say, look, many of us are sometimes dead, spiritually speaking, and this is a kind of poetic metaphor for that. We have these elaborately-constructed intellectual mechanisms of defense. All of this in service of ensuring to us that what's dead stays that way. I've not seen the dead be raised in Durham, I will not be lured into believing that this happened in Bethany, we say. But of course that is just what they said back there in Bethany, when they first saw Jesus. Jesus gets out to the cemetery, and the first things that Martha said to him are, "Lord, don't trouble yourself, Lazarus is dead." Case closed, you're too late to do him any good. What we need is a good grief counselor to help us adjust to the facts of death. We began to look at something like this not with open minded determination to understand what this strange thing means, but with a closed-minded refusal to consider that anything really weird, that is miraculous, has happened. When confronted by John 11 one through 44, what do we do? First we have our creed. First dogma. Miracles don't happen. The world is in this fixed grip of certain natural irrefutable laws, Amen. Now let's all get together and explain, make some sense of why miracles do not happen. Such is our attempt to reason about the essentially unreasonable. And we think that we are so wonderfully open-minded. This story of Lazarus reminds me of a story, a parable Jesus told, about another Lazarus. In Luke 16. There, there is a miserable Lazarus, who dies of poverty, and sickness, and hunger. Now there was a rich man in the story who had never been hungry, and never been sick, but he dies. And when they get to the afterlife, the rich man is surprised that he has landed in Hell. And poor Lazarus now reposes in the bosom of Father Abraham. And so, the rich man pleads with Father Abraham, "Oh please, please let me come back from the dead and go back and warn all my self-satisfied, rich relatives that this is the way things work out in the world. That this is the end for those in investment banking, or Enron. Let me go back to my neighbors who work for Anderson Consulting and warn them to change their ways and repent, and straighten up and do right." Father Abraham says, "Forget it. If they won't listen to scripture, if they wouldn't listen to the words of the prophets, if they wouldn't heed Moses, you think they're going to heed somebody who comes back from the dead? Stay in Hell." Well Jesus, it's just a parable, it's just a story, but in a curious way, its truthfulness is verified in today's gospel of the raising of Lazarus. Here we've got a Lazarus who has come back from the dead. He is unbound, he is free, he is standing before them as an irrefutable living sign. Proof of life-giving power of Jesus. Mary and Martha seemed to figure things out. You are the Messiah, the one sent from God. But the crowd, all the rest of us, respond with one voice, "This is impossible. It is impossible to have somebody walking around loose doing this kind of stuff. Let's kill Jesus." When Jesus shouts, "Unbind him! Let him go!" He's shouting to dead Lazarus in the tomb, I suppose. But I wonder if one reason that he shouts so loudly is maybe he's hoping that we will overhear. That we listening in on this scene might hear him shout as well. He's shouting to a dead person. But he's also being heard by dying people. Oh we think of ourselves as so open-minded, so open-futured, free, so alive to all that we meet in the world. We're modern people. We call the world as we see it. We're free from prejudices, we're free from narrowness of vision. But I don't know, I'm not so sure. Maybe we're all so bound by that modern worldview that rather tightly restricts

what can and what cannot be, that confines our notions of just who is in charge and where the world is moving. If you began to think about these things with the assumption that God has withdrawn from the world, that the future is all fixed and determined. That there is no power afoot other than our own, then if Jesus should intrude and unbind a corpse, well you may find yourself wishing that he were dead. That you could go back to a more secure, safer, fixed little world. In a way, you see, all of us are Lazarus. We're not dead, not yet. But all of us are headed to Lazarus's destination. And that binds us, that confines us. So we adjust, we face facts. We stoically settle down in to some sort of arrangement with omnipotent death. Death becomes an article of faith for us. You only go around once, Amen. You can't teach an old dog new tricks, right. People don't change, Amen. I had no other option, it was the only thing I could do, Amen. So we're hooked. We're addicted, we're bound, we're caught. We call it substance abuse or factors beyond our control, or the facts of life, but what they really are is the facts of death. We're bound, we're hung up, we're fixed, we're entombed. And though this sort of thing is not much of a way to live, there is at least something to be said for facing the facts. But then there intrudes in to our dark arrangements this one with a voice loud enough to wake the dead, "Unbind him! Let him go!" And some free being strides forth, unhooked, unbound, and what do we say? "Well let's get organized! Let's pull out all our intellectual, political, psychological resources, let's get together, let's kill it." In less than two weeks, that's exactly what we'll do, at a place called Calvary. A friend of mine, who spent his adult life active in AA, Alcoholics Anonymous, tells me that a high percentage of people are unable to beat the disease of alcoholism. And that's not surprising, because addiction to alcohol is a tough thing to beat. And yet some do. Some break free, he says. And I said to him, "You know, I understand that in AA, you teach people that they've only got one problem in life, alcohol. Their problem is not their marriage, their problem is not something their parents did to them when they were young, their problem is they just can't stop drinking." My friend confirmed this to be true. But then he added something that was interesting. He said, "Sometimes, when you finally stop drinking, when you finally get sober, you finally break free, take the cure, sometimes you find that you have another problem." "Well what is that other problem," I ask. What to do with a new life, that's the problem. My friend said, "When you're drinking, when you're caught, you don't have to think about what to do with your life. The bottle tells you every move to make. But when you get free, when you get your life back, well, the ball's back in your court, and that can be more than a little frightening." Well that kinda thing might make you wanna kill AA for setting you free. For giving you tomorrow, for giving you a life. It is odd how frightening resurrection can be. Once new life is handed to us, the ball is back in our court. Should there be one who comes out to our tomb and peers in? The one who weeps, because he thinks it's a shame that anybody dies before he or she really lives? One who shouts with a loud voice, loud enough to wake the dead, "Unbind her! Let her go!" Well what then? What would be our reaction? Will our reaction be, "Lazarus is dead, case closed." Or, "Unbind us. Let us go"?