

Lent 5 – A (2020)
John 11: Selected verses

A university professor was in an airport a while back, waiting for her plane to be called when her mind took off on a flight of its own. The professor was Joan Meyers-Levy, and she taught at the University of Minnesota’s Carlson School of Management.

There in the airport, Meyers-Levy was conscious of being in a reasonably open space with high ceilings, but it occurred to her that she would soon be entering a cramped space with low ceilings — the airplane. That started her wondering whether ceiling heights could have any effect on how we think about things.

She took that question home with her and decided to try to find an answer. At the university, she conducted a series of tests in which she had students perform various tasks on a laptop computer — some in a room with a 10-foot ceiling and some in a room identical in every way except that the ceiling was two feet lower.

What she discovered was that students in the higher-ceiling room consistently did well on tasks where they had to envision the relationships between things, while students in the lower-ceiling room performed better on detail-oriented work. The professor explains the results this way:

With the higher ceiling heights, what seems to happen is that people subconsciously get a sense of freedom from the spaciousness of the room. And in lower ceilings, we are activating thoughts related to a sense of confinement, or some kind of limitation. And these thoughts shape the kind of processing we do.

You might ask, “What does this have to do with John 11?” Since we’re speaking about low-ceiling heights that impart a sense of confinement, the tomb of Lazarus definitely comes into play. It’s the burial chamber where Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, has been buried. Verse 38 describes the tomb as a cave, with a stone “rolled across its entrance” (that is, sealing the tomb). Whether it was a naturally occurring cave or a cavity hewn out of the rock, we don’t know, for both types were used for burials in those days, but, in either case, these chambers often were the repositories for *several* bodies. Although the central area could be roomy, the bodies were laid on shelves hacked out of the walls, one above the other. This means that each body was in a space with almost no head room, let alone a cathedral ceiling.

Tombs are okay dwellings for the dead, but if you are alive, they are no place to linger. And that’s why, in the gospel account, Jesus called for Lazarus to come out of the tomb. Jesus was enabling Lazarus to rejoin the living, so he called Lazarus to come out of his low-ceiling abode and stand under the high firmament of God’s sky.

Of course, we don’t have to actually die to get stuck under a low ceiling in this life. Life is hard, and we can get so bogged down in the day-to-day routine of making a living, paying the bills, mowing the lawn, shoveling the snow, dealing with the usual stuff that goes awry, trying to keep up with the demands others place upon us and so on, that we feel as if we don’t have time for much high-ceiling thinking and that’s not even when we are cooped up at home practicing quarantine.

And that’s too bad, because, although it’s necessary and important that we handle that commonplace stuff, it can demand so much attention that we get drawn into low-ceiling perspectives on life itself — low-ceiling perspectives such as:

- the notion that the limited view of life we see is all that there is;
- the assumption that we should satisfy ourselves in whatever way we can because “you only go around once”;
- the idea that individuals don’t matter in the overall scheme of things;
- the belief that “when our number’s up, it’s all over”; the belief that nothing much ever really changes.

Believing is at the heart of this week’s gospel reading. The verb “to believe” shows up consistently throughout the text (verses 15, 25, 26, 27, 40, and 42). Jesus says both to his disciples (verse 15) and to God and to the crowd of onlookers at the tomb of Lazarus that he is doing what he is doing “so that they might believe you have sent me” (v. 42). In other words, everything that Jesus does in today’s story is aimed at provoking belief. It is a question that every person has to answer, “Do you believe this?”

What we believe affects how we live our lives. People wonder when this pandemic will have run its course and we can get back to normal? What will a new normal look like? We don’t even know what may happen tomorrow or when we will die. “[Since] . . . no one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows,” (Matthew 24:36) how do we live our lives: as if today is our last day or as if we will live *forever*? Our Bible story today provokes us to answer the question, “If you died today — but were given a “Lazarus opportunity”— how would you live it differently with your spouse, with your God, with your children, with your church, and so on.”

Different people react differently, and even though people react differently to reaching middle age, many view it as a time to reflect on how they have lived up to that point in their lives. Often when we reach our middle years, we realize that many of the goals and dreams we had when we were young will not be fulfilled. Some of us may even look back with regret for the way we have lived. Much has been written about the negative ways we react to this “mid-life crisis.” But the anxieties of middle age can also cause people to turn to the Lord, whether they need forgiveness, a fresh start, a renewed purpose in life or simply God’s encouragement to go on.

God offers new starts and second, third, fourth, fifth — countless — chances. Forgiveness and renewal are always available. Whatever our stage in life, we can be grateful that God gives us forgiveness and opportunities for new beginnings. Against all of that, Jesus comes along and says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.”

We all understand the concept here, although we’re more likely to use phrases like “Think outside the box,” or, as in the case of Taco Bell executives a while back who wanted us to get past the idea that fast food meant cheeseburgers and fries. Thus, “Outside the bun.”

Jesus clearly had a “think outside of the grave” mentality, something Martha and the disciples didn’t have. Lent is a high-ceiling, thinking outside the grave kind of moment for us. It’s an opportunity to understand that Jesus calls us to a higher level of life, to leave behind low-ceiling, inside the box, inside the grave perspectives.

There’s no better context to experience and implement this kind of radical thinking than in and through the church.

One congregation took this kind of thinking to heart. Recently they reviewed their mission statement, which included some ambitious aims in keeping with the Great Commission He gives to the disciples recorded in Matthew 28:19, “Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” But this congregation is in a rural, no-growth area, and its membership is gradually shrinking. So someone at the meeting suggested that the mission statement should be revised to say, “We will become the best small church that we can be.”

It’s unlikely that this person was thinking in terms of low ceilings at the time, but do you see what the effect of such a mission statement could be? It may sound realistic, but it *lowers* the expectations, *lowers* the goals, and gets the congregation *focused more on the day-to-day details* of being a church with a limited mission in one limited area instead of thinking how it can accomplish the larger vision beyond its borders and around the world.

Does it strike you as odd: Jesus’ seeming nonchalance about arriving at the tomb of Lazarus? “What is wrong with Jesus? Why is it taking him so long to get into gear? Will he ever come quickly enough to help [us]?” My hour has not yet come, Jesus has said.

God empowers Jesus to raise Lazarus, not so much as to resurrect Lazarus, as much as to show hearers and readers who Jesus is. We want Jesus to snap his fingers at the beginning of this story and bring Lazarus back to life. Yet we, like those in Bethany, must allow God to work through time and pain and our own limited understanding to bring about resurrection. Waiting for Jesus or waiting for God to work in our lives is never easy. Perhaps we shall always be anxious about it. One momentous article of faith, however, is that we know God will act – we just don’t know when or how! But sometimes it takes longer than we want or can stand.

Without organized, professional sports these days, the great games of the past, basketball, baseball, etc. are being rebroadcast. But none of those match up with the greatest football game ever played. That game was played on a day that was dull and dead after a rainy weekend, so you can understand how it must have been on the ark: Noah’s ark. They couldn’t play cards because Noah sat on the deck, so they had to think of other things to do.

Well, the tiger suggested to the giraffe that they could choose up sides for a football game. The tiger’s team won the toss, and on the first play from scrimmage, the monkey handed off to the rhino, who charged up the middle for ten yards. On the next play the rhino rambled all the way for a touchdown. It seems the giraffe had made all the best picks because at the half his team led 42 to 0. Early in the second half the monkey again handed off to the rhino. The rhino saw a hole in the line, but suddenly a ten-foot-long centipede, playing defensive tackle, reared up into the hole, grabbed the rhino and shook the whole ark when he threw him to the deck, causing the rhino to fumble. The rabbit, playing free safety, picked up the ball and scored for the tiger’s team, spiking the ball over the goal post. The tiger ran over to the centipede shouting, “Fantastic tackle! We’ll turn this game around right now! By the way, where were you in the first half?” The centipede, “Well, I had to tie my shoes.”

Where were you when we needed you, Jesus? Things looked so dead without you. Now we can win!

By the power of God, we can have victory over sin and death and even the depressions of everyday life and life in the midst of pandemic. As I suggested last week, if we have eyes and ears and hearts open, we can see God’s hand at work. In spite of and even in the midst of our current new reality, we can see signs of God’s power and love are visible all around us. We live in a world with abundance – and are invited by God to share our blessings with others. In our actions, too, the

signs of God's love and power may be displayed so that others will believe. We go with Jesus to the tombs of need, despair, and loneliness – and hear him speak the call to new life.

“Do you believe this?” What is it to which you can stand up and boldly say “I believe”? The Bible is full of the most extravagant promises, the most expansive gifts. Do you read those texts and nod, asserting that “I do believe this”?

Would you believe ... the Bible says this: The same spirit that worked wonders at Pentecost dwells in you today?

Would you believe ... the Bible says this: You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you? (Philippians 4:13)

Would you believe ... the Bible says this: You can do exceedingly, abundantly, above all that you can ask or think? (Ephesians 3:20)

Would you believe ... the Bible says this: To as many as received him, to them he gave power, even to become the sons and daughters of God? (John 1:12)

Would you believe ... the Bible says this: The resurrection power that raised Lazarus from the dead can be at work in you today?

Is there anyone worshipping today who will believe what they believe?

As a young man, D.L. Moody, American evangelist of the 19th century, was called upon suddenly to preach a funeral sermon. He hunted all throughout the four gospels trying to find one of Christ's funeral sermons, but searched in vain.

He found that Christ broke up every funeral he ever attended. Death could not exist where he was. When the dead heard his voice they sprang to life. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection, and the life.”

It is the power of God through Jesus that can raise us so we can truly live.

So this week, we acknowledge that Lazarus is us. We, too, are dead. Stinking dead. And like him, we have hope of anything other than further demise and decay only through the power of Jesus Christ, who is the Resurrection and the Life.

The call to Lazarus is to come forth, to leave the tomb behind.

Jesus Christ calls us to no less, in this life and in the next life to come: To leave death and all its ways behind.

And as he calls us to leave the tomb, we see in the story of the raising of Lazarus, he truly calls us, calls us as a church, and not simply as individuals, to help save every person from death as well.

Jesus commanded the onlookers to roll away the stone (verse 39). What stones are you helping to roll away from those who are dead or left for dead?

He commanded others to “unbind him and let him go” (verse 44). How are you helping others to loosen their bonds to captivity to sin and death? How are you helping them to think outside the box and beyond the grave? How do you proclaim the good news that since Jesus lives, those who believe in Him can live also?

In raising Lazarus, Jesus not only restored him, but called the community around him, to complete what he had begun. We walk together with all who have died and are being raised, that the fullness of Christ's resurrection may be known in our lives now and in the new life of resurrection.