

FHPC 25th Sanctuary Anniversary Sermon
 THE RAISING OF LAZARUS
 (or, “ Do You Believe God Will Raise
 YOU From the Dead?”)
 John 11:32-44 (NRSV)
 November 1, 2015
 Fort Hill PCUSA, Clemson, SC
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I want to thank the Session for inviting me back to preach today. When Laura Conrad called me, she told me that today you are celebrating several things: (1) All Saints Day, (2) The Kirkin’ O’ the Tartan, (3) The 25th Anniversary of the building of this Sanctuary, and (4) numerous other parts of the life of Fort Hill Church. With so much on your platter for today, I decided to “play it safe” and merely preach from the Common Lectionary Passage from the Gospel for today; it is the story of the Raising of Lazarus; I have subtitled the sermon: “Do You Believe God Will Raise YOU From the Dead?”

(Preacher’s Note: It is important for all of the story of Lazarus (11:1-45) to be read; however, for preaching purposes in worship, I will publicly read only 11:32-44n(NRSV).

- 32 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.”
- 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.
- 34 He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”
- 35 Jesus began to weep.

- 36 So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"
- 37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"
- 38 Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.
- 39 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 four days."
- 40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"
- 41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me.
- 42 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."
- 43 When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"
- 44 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."

My Friends: today's passage of Scripture in the Gospel of John presents us with one of those situations where you and I are faced head-on with one of those issues in life that are of extreme importance.

It is the issue of RESURRECTION.

Do you believe that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead?

In his letter to the Church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul states a truth when he says, "*The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*" (1 Corinthians 15:26)

So, the question "*Do you believe that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead?*" itself leads to a more basic question:

Do you believe that God raised Jesus from the dead?

It is around that question that one wrestles with the basics of the Christian faith, because it leads us all to the question we all wonder about:

Do you believe that God will raise YOU from the dead?

(Do you think that I am getting pretty close to where YOU are sitting?)

The late Shirley Guthrie, Professor of Theology at Columbia Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, put it this way in this book, Christian Doctrine:

“If it could be said that the whole of the Christian faith stands or falls with any one claim, the claim that God raised the crucified Jesus from the dead is that claim. Without faith in a risen and living Christ there would be no Christianity. It was not Jesus’ ethical teachings and example or his noble death that gave birth to the Christian church and made it spread; it was the news of his resurrection.
 (Guthrie, Shirley, Christian Doctrine (Revised Edition), Louisville, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994, p.271)3

A Presbyterian minister named Harry Cole was the Pastor of the Lochern Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, Maryland. He tells, in an issue of *The Presbyterian Outlook* (April 6, 1987) of a harrowing experience where his wife Jackie, becomes seriously ill, is hospitalized, and goes into a coma. After six weeks, because of the medical reports of her physical deterioration during the coma, Harry Cole finally decides to remove her from her life-support systems. But a court refuses to allow this to be done. We take up the story at this point.

On Thursday, May 15, a close friend of ours, John Evans, came to see Jackie for what he thought was the last time. It was a warm, sunny late

afternoon when John and I walked into Jackie's room. She lay motionless in her hospital bed, pale and debilitated from the effects of her illness.

The shooting sound of the respirator which I had come to know so well over the previous weeks continued to signal that it was breathing for her. John walked around to the far side of Jackie's bed while I stood at the foot. I asked him if he wished to be alone with her. He said it wasn't necessary, and reached over the guard rails of the bed, taking Jackie's hand in his own.

John called out her name and said hello. She responded immediately. Jacqueline opened her eyes. She looked out into the room and saw me standing in front of her. It was the 47th day of her coma. Within minutes, Jackie was transferred back into the Intensive Care Unit where the previously high level of treatment to save her life was resumed.

Now, what do you make of that Presbyterian preacher's story?

In light of your own faith in God, how do you deal with it?

And what do you make of the story of
Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead?

In light of your own faith in God, how do you deal with it?

Perhaps some of you remember that the Apostle Paul emphasized the importance of the resurrection of Jesus to us believers when Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth and to the Church gathered here in Clemson today:

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that God raised Christ—whom God did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then, those also who have died in Christ have perished.

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. [*1 Corinthians 15:12-19; NRSV*]

Do YOU believe that God raised Jesus from the dead?

My friends: in the 50 years that I have been an ordained Presbyterian Minister, I have laughed with Presbyterians at parties and weddings, and I have worried with Presbyterians through hospitals and divorce. But I would imagine that one of the ways that Presbyterians have honored me as a Minister is by allowing me to touch a part of their lives at the time of the death of a loved one or the death of a friend.

You and I know that there is really very little you can say to someone who is going through the valley of the shadow of death. You can pray that God will use you to be **God's rod** and **God's staff** to comfort them. You can tell the family that you are sorry for their suffering, and you can offer to be of whatever help you can be. But the emotion of the moment acts as a barrier to much more than that.

And yet, if you have been to any of the funerals that I have conducted, you know that it is at a funeral that I feel most compelled to SHOUT the Good News

that there is a God, and

that in Jesus Christ God has overcome both death and the grave!

The Apostle Paul reminds us:

For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: **“Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”**.....Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

[1 Corinthians 15:53-55, 57; NRSV]

500 years ago, in the 16th century, the English poet and Church of England

Priest named **John Donne** (who lived from 1573 - 1631) wrote:

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so; For those, whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow, die not, poor death; nor yet canst thou kill me. From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures bed, much pleasure, then from thee much more must flow; and soonest our best men with thee do go, rest of their bones, and soul's delivery. Thou are slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men, and doth with poison, war and sickness dwell; and poppy or charms can make us sleep as well and better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then? One short sleep past, we wake eternally, and death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

[The Standard Book of British and American Verse, selected by Nella Braddy, New York, The Garden City Publishing Company, Inc., 1932, p.97]

In the New Testament, John writes near the end of Revelations:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I, John, saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, **“See, the tabernacle of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his people, and God Himself will be with them; He will wipe every tear from their eyes. death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”**

[Revelation 21:1-4; NRSV]

ALL SAINTS' DAY:

when we resurrect in our memories all those persons
who have gone before us in the faith to keep the church alive;

KIRKIN' 'O THE TARTAN SUNDAY:

when we resurrect in our memories our heritage in the faith
from Scotland and members of our families
who have gone before us in the faith to keep the church alive;

THE 25th ANNIVERSARY OF THE BUILDING OF THIS SANCTUARY:

when we resurrect in our memories our fellow members
who had the foresight and money to plan and build this
wonderful place for the worship of God.

SURELY THE ANCIENT PSALMIST

must have had Fort Hill Church in mind when he wrote:

***"...You anoint my head with oil,
my cup runneth over..."***

(Psalm 23:5b)

Now, of course, I do not know what you are going to do with the
Baltimore Presbyterian Preacher's story about the resurrection of his wife
from a coma of 47 days duration.

And, of course, I do not know what you are going to do with the
gospel-writer John's story of the resurrection of Jesus' friend Lazarus from
being dead for four days in a tomb.

But, as you wrestle with these two stories, I **DO** want you to
hear (1) the preaching of the Church of All Saints and (2) the preaching of

our forebears in the Church of Scotland and (3) the proclamation of this Minister of the Gospel in this 25 year old Sanctuary:

**I DECLARE UNTO YOU
THAT THERE IS MORE THAN THE GRAVE,
AND
THAT JESUS WAS TELLING THE TRUTH WHEN HE SAID:**

**“I am the resurrection and the life;
everyone who believes in me, though they die, yet shall they live;
and whoever lives and believes in me
shall never die.”
(John 11:25)**

And if you really and truly believe that, you know what it means, don't you?

It means that you can oversubscribe this year's church budget so that Fort Hill Church can do what it needs to do in order that you can BE the church;

it means that you can give yourself away through Clemson Community Care and Habitat for Humanity and countless other acts of kindness that will help end the poverty and suffering of the poor;

it means that you can find a person whose skin is a different color from yours and begin the healing that can make America great;

it means that you can get politically active so that you can elect honest and caring and loving people to political office locally and in South Carolina, and in our country; and

it means that you can relax..... and enjoy the blessings of God.

**So—— if you came to church this morning just hoping that you would
hear some GOOD NEWS,
you just heard it!**