

## **GOD DOES THE IMPOSSIBLE**

**By Pastor James Lambert**

**August 2, 2020 (9:30 worship)**

**LOOK UP Series**

**John 11:38-44**

Good morning, my friends, I'm so pleased to be sharing the Word with you this morning, along with Pastor John at the 8 AM service and Pastor Melissa at the 11 AM service. That actually makes me the \*oldest\* of three pastor who are preaching this morning. 😊 [In fact I turned 40 the other day and every so often I go on Facebook to see if my fellow Oklahoma Methodists have kicked me out of the "young clergy" group page yet. Any day now somebody will remember that a few of us need the boot.]

We are continuing our series today entitled "Look Up." Today we will read a beautiful Scripture in which our Lord Jesus himself "looks up" to heaven. What we have in this Scripture is a really BIG moment. I approach this message with some fear and trembling, actually, because what is on display here is SO holy, SO powerful, and SO central to God's story of salvation, that I feel quite unworthy to explain it to you this morning. In fact I am reminded of a beautiful old prayer that used to be used in Communion services, called "The Prayer of Humble Access." In the Methodist tradition and some other old liturgies it used to be prayed right after the Great Thanksgiving and right before receiving the Bread and Cup. I actually want to invite you to pray this prayer along with me now. Even though it is not time for Communion yet, for the Table, I want to pray this prayer as we prepare to approach the WORD, as we approach the Mystery of the Son of God who has come into the world. I feel the need to invite the Lord's presence before we turn to this story of Jesus. And then this whole time in the Word will prepare us to approach the Table afterwards. Would you pray with me: [On screens]

We do not presume to come to this Your table,  
 O merciful Lord,  
 trusting in our own righteousness,  
 but in Your manifold and great mercies.

We are not worthy  
 so much as to gather up the crumbs under Your table.

But You are the same Lord,  
 whose property is always to have mercy.

Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord,  
 so to partake of this Word and Sacrament of Your Son Jesus Christ,  
 that we may walk in newness of life,  
 may grow into His likeness,  
 and may evermore dwell in Him, and He in us. Amen.

Amen. Thank you for praying with me. As we get ready to read together let me quickly set the stage for today's passage. The whole chapter of John 11 tells the story of Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha, resident of Bethany, a village just 2 miles outside of Jerusalem. It's the longest story in the gospel of John besides the Passion narrative of Jesus' own death, burial, and resurrection. If you've followed along

in your Sermon Journal then you've read the previous sections this week. Either way I'll catch us up quickly:

In the first part of John chapter 11, Jesus receives news from Mary and Martha that Lazarus is ill. They don't actually ask Him to come, but assume Jesus will do something. Jesus was staying at John the Baptist's old baptism site, another village known as Bethany, Bethany-beyond-Jordan, about 23 miles to the east, or one hard day's walk. So Jesus could have started a journey and been there fairly quickly. But instead Jesus does something really strange. He waits. He just hangs around, for two whole days after hearing His friend was dying.

Then, satisfied He has waited long enough, he announces to the disciples: "We're going back to Judea." And they try to stop Him because the leaders of the Jews were trying to arrest and stone Him. Jesus also announces that "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples misunderstand him at first, so he spells it out for them: "Lazarus is dead." And they start on their way, the disciples somewhat afraid and still not quite knowing what Jesus is planning to do.

When Jesus arrives at Bethany in Judea, the first person he meets is Martha. We know Martha as the practical and faithful sister, the good host, famous for her indignance at her sister Mary who loved to sit and listen to Jesus' teach and didn't always help Martha with the housework. But Martha too was a woman of deep faith. She said: "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." That's quite a vote of confidence. So Jesus says: "Your brother will rise again." And Martha, perhaps wanting Jesus to be more specific, says, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day..." [but... maybe You could do something about it before then?] That affirmation means that Martha believed in the resurrection as taught by the Pharisees and some other Jewish groups, but that was not a universal belief among Jews. The Sadducees, for example, did not believe in the resurrection. So then Jesus gives her the first amazing revelation of this chapter, in verses 25-26:

"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?"

And Martha says, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." In other words, the one we've been waiting for, the fulfillment of all Israel's hopes, and more.

So Martha goes and gets Mary, who then runs out to have her own confrontation with Jesus, where she says the same thing as her sister, "If you had been here our brother would not have died." At that point, seeing Mary crying, and seeing her friends and neighbors also mourning together with her, Jesus gets emotional Himself. Verse 33 says "He was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." Jesus asks where they have laid him. Then v. 35 says Jesus began to weep. Or, in the old King James, just two words: "Jesus wept." So Jesus cries tears at the death of his good friend, and some people say he cries tears at the unbelief of his disciples and the crowd. People were muttering all around, some saying "See how much he loved him!" and others saying "He opened a blind man's eyes, why couldn't he keep Lazarus from dying?"

It was a scene of sadness and confusion at that point. So let's read the rest of it together. This is John 11:38-44. Please read along with us on the screens or bring it up on your phone. Let us stand now for the reading of the Gospel.

*Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has 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 lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."*

This is the word of God for the people of God! [Thanks be to God.]

Amen.

You know my favorite part of that reading? It's where Jesus cries out: "Lazarus, come out!" Could you do that with me one more time really loud? I know I'm asking for a lot of participation today. But a simple reading is just not enough for me today, I want to shout it, here we go:

**"Lazarus, come out!"**

Thank you. This is the moment. This was the hour. Jesus isn't playing around anymore. He had done many miracles. He had opened the eyes of the blind. He had made the lame to walk. He had made the mute to speak and the deaf to hear. He had healed leprosy. He had multiplied the bread and fish and fed thousands of people. He had done more than enough to cement his reputation as a great wonder-worker. But Jesus didn't come to build a reputation and have people tell stories about how great He was. He came to start something. Not a little something, but a big something. **Jesus came to re-create the world.** And He started with Lazarus.

Lazarus wasn't actually the first person ever raised from the dead. There were about 9 individuals raised from the dead in the Bible. 3 in the Old Testament, 3 by Jesus, then Jesus himself, then 2 more in the New Testament. So Lazarus wasn't the first person ever to be brought back to life. But he was the first and only person to be called out of the tomb after 4 days, with his body already beginning to rot, and the stench of ripe death filling the cave. There was no explaining away or misinterpreting this instance of resurrection. Lazarus was not passed out on his deathbed; he was not just "mostly dead." [Are there any "Princess Bride" fans out there? Classic movie. There's the scene where Miracle Max tells the heroes that their friend is just "mostly dead," and thus still "slightly alive."] But no, there was no mistaking it; Lazarus was indeed, "all dead."

And that's why Jesus waited 2 extra days. He wanted no room for misinterpretation of what was about to happen.

So He looks up to heaven, and has a quick conversation with His Father. Notice how the impossible begins with prayer, even for Jesus. Though He could have just gone around working wonders Himself, Jesus always modeled for us a relationship with God by talking to and about his Father. Then He shouts:

**“Lazarus, come out!”**

As you imagine this scene in your mind... Can you hear the voice of God? Because that’s what it was. “Lazarus, come out!”

This is the same voice that spoke at Creation. “Lazarus, come out!”

This is the same voice that said, “Let there be light!” And there was light. And the world was no longer a formless void, but a place of light and dark, sea and sky and dry land, and fish and birds and beasts.

This is the same voice that said, “Let us make humankind in Our own image.” And in the image of God He created him, male and female he created them. And there we were. That’s where we came from, the voice of God. We appeared at His command.

We humans in all of our glory. Yes, it is good and right to say “all of our glory,” for we are made in the image of God, and we reflect God’s glory. We were the crowning glory of creation, actually. And that’s why there is something to weep about when we die. Because we were meant to be immortal, and to live in perfect harmony with all of God’s creation. There is something to cry about when our life ends, and long before that, when our life goes wrong: when we stray from the path of God’s love, when we steal, and kill, and destroy one another, when we turn from the worship of the Creator to worshiping his creatures, or idols of our own making.

There is so much to cry about in our death, and in our life. So much has been lost, from the time when our first parents disobeyed God, to the times when we ourselves have chosen our own selfish desires over love of neighbor, the times we have chosen addiction to pleasure or substances over worship of God, the times we have participated in violence and waste and deceit. There is much to cry about.

The Jews in Jesus time were crying under oppression. They had an uneasy peace with Rome but they could not rule themselves. They were unfairly taxed. They were subject to being killed or persecuted on the whims of the puppet king. They could cry about that. They could cry about the lost glory of the first Temple of God, only partially reflected in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple and Herod’s additions. There was much to cry about in the squabbling religious factions as well, the Pharisees vs the Sadducees, the scribes and religious professionals vs the common people and the rebels and the zealots.

Just as today we have much to be in mourning about. Pandemic illness and death. Political divisions more extreme than most of us have ever seen before. Confusion about what is fact and what is fiction. Injustice and inequality on the one hand, breakdown in shared values and freedoms on the other. And personally, personally, we have all sorts of pain and hurt we may be mourning today. The illness of a child. The breakdown of a marriage. The estrangement of family members. The abuse or neglect of children.

But mostly the crying in our story here was just good old-fashioned human sympathy at one of humanity's oldest enemies, namely, death. Jewish people to this day have a very healthy practice of mourning with one another, of weeping when the bereaved family weeps, and sitting in silence with them when they want to sit in silence.

So Jesus cried along with the friends and neighbors gathered. Jesus wept. But then he shouted, "Lazarus, come out!"

And the man who had died came out, alive. And after that, Jesus gave the somewhat more mundane instruction: "Unbind him, and let him go."

There's a lot we could say here. I don't know what each one of you \*individually\* needs to hear today. Only the Holy spirit knows that. But I know **this is a story of re-creation**. You could say it's a story of God doing the impossible. But all things are possible for God. (Mt. 19:26) And this is something that is possible only for God: re-creation. Making something out of what is essentially nothing. Lazarus was dead, he was gone. There was no life in him. The atoms and molecules which made him up were breaking down. There were no electronic signals in his brain. His nervous system was finished. His lungs were collapsed. His fluids were drained. His "spirit," the inner immaterial part of him, was no longer present, whatever that entails. Four days gone. Not a glimmer of hope.

Except for Jesus. Even in deepest despair there is Jesus. And these people trusted Him. They knew him. Mary, and Martha, and the Disciples that followed Jesus around. They knew him and trusted him. They knew He could do \*something.\* Or at least, he \*could have done\* something. And then He did.

So what is the message for us? I think we can look at one sentence that Jesus says quickly to the crowd: "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"

And so the message for you today, friends, is that if you believe, **if you believe, you will see the glory of God.**

I tell you today, this is true. **This is real. If you believe, if you trust in this man, this Jesus, who lived and died 2,000 years ago, and raised up his friend Lazarus for a few more years of earthly life; if you trust Jesus today, in 2020, you will see the glory of God... today, in 2020.** You will see the glory of God in many ways, in this life, and in the life to come.

But there's a disclaimer or two about that. You will see the glory of God, but you may not see it in the precise \*way\* you are seeking right away. I say that not just as a realist, as a practical person not wanting to fill you with empty promises, but as someone who has read Scriptures. We know the stories of God's people. **There is a lot of \*waiting\* in the Bible. There is a lot of \*waiting\* to see the glory of God.** I did say, however, that you will see the glory of God \*today\* if you trust Him \*today.\* And that is because, for Christians, for those called by the name of Christ, \*part\* of the glory of God is inside of us. \*Part\* of the glory of God is what John Wesley called "the inner witness." The inner assurance that, yes, Christ died for me, I am a child of God, and I will see the resurrection someday. The Holy Spirit in me

tells me God has redeemed me, and I am an agent of redemption and restoration in the world today, and someday I will see the resurrection and restoration of all things good. The Holy Spirit in you is the seal of God's promises to you and all who believe in Christ (2 Cor 1:21-22).

So if you trust God today for your relationships with loved ones, the disclaimers are that you may have to wait a while to see relationships fully restored, and you can't control the other person's choices. But when you trust God you will find more love in your own heart for the people you need to love. And that is the inbreaking glory of God, the beginning of God's re-creation in your life.

If you trust God with your physical health, the disclaimer is that you may not see the exact healing you are looking for. I wish I could say you will. But you may not – and please don't let anyone tell you it's from a lack of faith, either, by the way. But if you trust God with your physical health, you will find in yourself a growing sense of gratitude for the of the gifts of health you have been given in whatever measure. You will find a growing awareness of God's presence as Comforter when you are in pain. You will find a growing wisdom in caring for yourself. The Holy Spirit will empower you to live fully in the moment. And you may indeed find miraculous healing if the Spirit leads. Because God can and does do the impossible, when He chooses.

If you trust God with the world around you, the disclaimer is that the problems of the world are not going to go away. But nonetheless, God will make you into the salt of the earth, and the light of the world. God will make you an agent of change, an agent of peace, an ambassador of the love of Jesus and the justice of God wherever you go. **God will work re-creation through you**, in your corner of the world, one life at a time.

And so as we close this teaching time and get ready to move to the Table, I ask you:

~ What is dead in your life that God needs to raise again?

~ What is sleeping in your life that God needs to wake up?

Where are those areas of healing and resurrection? What do you need to send in a message to Jesus in hopes that he will come? What people in your life, what relationships, what ailments, what situations, do you need to name to Jesus so that he can call them to new life in His time?

Whatever comes to your mind this morning, whatever you are carrying on your heart, I encourage you to bring that with you to the Table today. Bring those people and situations and needs with you to the Table; lay them at the altar with your gifts, and receive the Lord's resurrection power as you partake of the Body and the Blood of this Jesus, this death-defeater, this dead-raiser, the Lord of all Creation.

I leave you with a few more words of Scripture, words of promise which would have been familiar to Martha, and Mary, and Lazarus, with no comments from me, just the words of God.

Hear this from Ezekiel 36: "It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of My holy name... I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land... A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will

remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you... On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the towns to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt.”

Hear this from Daniel 12: “But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt... But you, go your way, and rest; you shall rise for your reward at the end of days.”

And finally these words from Paul’s letter to the Corinthian Christians, chapter 15: – “Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We shall not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed... Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

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