

John 11, 3–45

Of all the miracles Jesus did the Raising of Lazarus ranks as the most astonishing to the people of His time. Traditional Jewish belief had it that the soul of a dead person somehow remains with the body for three days. After three days the soul departs finally from the body never to return, and that is when corruption sets in. And so when Martha objects to the opening of the tomb and says, “Lord, there is already a stench because he has been dead four days” she was expressing the common view that this is now a hopeless situation.

For the early Christians the story of the raising of Lazarus was more than a pointer to the resurrection of Jesus. For them this miracle is a challenge to never give up hope even in the hopeless situations in which they found themselves as individuals, as a church or as a nation. It is never too late for God to revive and revitalize a person, a church or a nation. But we must learn to cooperate with God.

How can we cooperate with God so as to experience God’s resurrection power in our lives and in our world?

Well, everyone knows the answer already: faith! But that is not the point that John the Evangelist makes in this story. Expectant faith is not the emphasis here. The emphasis in the story on how we cooperate with a miracle-working God is placed on practical obedience and doing God’s will.

To effect the miracle, Jesus issues three commands and all of them are obeyed to the letter. That is how the miracle happens.

First. Jesus said, “**Roll away the stone... so they rolled away the stone.**” Did the people understand why they should do this heavy work of rolling away the tombstone to expose a stinking corpse? They didn’t. But it was their faith in Jesus expressing itself not through intellectual agreement with Jesus but through practical agreement with Him through obedience. Why didn’t Jesus command the stone to roll away all by itself without bothering the people? I don’t know. But all I know is that the divine power seems always to be activated by human cooperation and stifled by non-cooperation.

The second command Jesus gives is directed to the dead man. “**Lazarus, come out! ...and the dead came out.**” We do not know the details of what transpired in the tomb. All we know is that Jesus’ word of command is followed by immediate obedience. And Lazarus gropes his way out of the dark tomb even with his hands and feet tied up in bandages, and his face all wrapped up.

The third command is addressed to the people. **“Unbind him and let him go.”** Even though Lazarus could stumble himself out of the tomb, there was no way he could unbind himself. He needs the community to do that for him. By unbinding Lazarus and setting him free from the death bands the community is accepting Lazarus back as one of them.

Many Christian individuals and communities today have fallen victims of the death of sin, indifference, hatred, and jealousy. Many are already in the tomb of hopelessness: whenever we see marriages end in separation or divorce, religious vocations terminated by departures, and careers cut short by unemployment. And because we experience death and mediocrity in so many ways, we can't help but wonder: Is there any meaning to life, or is it just an absurd existence? Is there some glorious destiny for us, or is this all just a futile endeavor?

In today's gospel Jesus claims to answer these questions. Jesus is ready for a miracle. But we have to do our part too. Are we ready to cooperate with Him for the miracle? Are we ready to roll away the stone that stands between us and the light of Christ? Are we ready to unbind ourselves and others from the bondage of wrong and personal ambition and thirst for power and recognition? These are the various ways we cooperate with God in the miracle of renewing and reviving us as individuals, as a church, and a nation.

As Christians, we should always look for new life in painful moments. No matter how devastating “death” may seem, we should be like Martha and Mary and say, “Lord, we have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God. You are the resurrection and the life.” With that we can be aware of the life Jesus has to offer us now. Hope amidst distress, faith in moments of discouragement or generosity when surrounded by selfishness.

How different would the world be if we believed Jesus: forgiveness where anger leads to hurting words, peace built on humility where pride causes tension and faith in people’s goodness instead of disgust for a failure.

It is never a mistake to have faith in Jesus!

Amen.

Fr. Steve