

Fearless Lazarus

By Scott Runyon
First Baptist Church of Birmingham
February 18, 2018

John 12:1,9-11

CHILDREN'S TIME

When I was little like you, I have to admit, I was afraid of some things, like of the dark. At the end of the day, when it was time to turn off the lights and go to bed, I wanted to know that I was secure in the dark. That's where my friend, a stuffed yellow bunny with a red nose, came to the rescue. Somehow, I wasn't so afraid when I had my bunny in bed with me.

Have you ever been afraid? Of course you have. We have all been afraid at some time or another. It is nothing to be ashamed of — even adults are sometimes afraid. Some of us are afraid of being up high, some are afraid of the water, some might be afraid of spiders, but all of us are afraid of something.

One day Jesus' disciples got into a boat and headed to the other side of the lake. Before they got to the other side, it got dark, the wind started to blow and waves started crashing over the sides of the boat.

The disciples were starting to get afraid when they saw someone coming toward them walking on the water. The Bible says that the disciples were terrified!

Then, they heard Jesus' voice. He said, "It's me, don't be afraid." The Bible tells us that when they realized it was Jesus, they invited him into the boat and they were not afraid any more.

When it comes to being afraid, we are all in the same boat. But when we invite Jesus to be with us, we have nothing to fear, because we are not alone.

SERMON

(Enter Lazarus from the back of the sanctuary)

"Good morning everyone! Back here! I had to come in the back way because the chief priests were chasing me up through Shain Park, and your pastor let me hide for a bit down in the lower level of the church building. I hope you don't mind. Let me know if you see any of the chief priests coming. I'm sure you'll understand — I'll have to duck out if they find me.

It's not that I'm afraid of them, but they don't like it so much that I

have been sharing with so many people about the amazing thing Jesus did for me. They'd rather I shut up about it all because it is rocking their fishing boat.

Thinking about boats, do you know why they never played cards on the Ark? Because Noah was always standing on the deck.

Anyway, last week, the chief priests tried some scare tactics to quiet me down. They got some people to surround the synagogue where I was sharing my story. They were clanging swords and all to get me to stop, but that didn't scare me.

Then they tried a shrewd way of getting to me by paying off a few friends of mine to get them to talk me out of sharing my story. But my friends were even more shrewd and told me all about it. The chief priests wanted them to scare me by talking about how they could get the Romans after me. They are threatening to hand me over to the Romans to torture me — maybe even making me an example by hanging me up on one of their Roman crosses out on the edge of town.

None of that scares me though. I just need to keep sharing my story. See, I'm not afraid of dying. I've been there, done that.

Oh silly me. I didn't introduce myself. My name is Lazarus from Bethany, a couple of miles east of Jerusalem. I live with my two older sisters, Martha and Mary. It's good to see you all today.

Hey, do you know why Jonah didn't trust the water? Because he knew there was something fishy about it! Good one eh? I just love good jokes! After dying, I realized you just can't take life too seriously.

Where was I? Oh yes! I just can't keep quiet, you know. I can't stop sharing with people about what Jesus did for me. Would you like to hear my story?

I suppose I should go back to my life before meeting Jesus. I grew up with two older sisters and my parents here in Bethany. We are crop farmers, growing millet and wheat. I was always afraid of stuff. Of course I was afraid of the Roman soldiers, but everyone is. I was also afraid of losing crops. I was afraid of walking too far from my hometown because I knew there were mean people out there. So I always stayed close to home.

My sisters and I met Jesus after our parents got really sick about five years ago. None of us knew why or what to do. They just kept getting more and more sick. We

had the village doctor over and he told us they were dying and he couldn't help them. So, we sat around their beds and said our goodbyes. That was the hardest thing I ever did. I was so afraid of what life would be like without them. I was so afraid and upset that day that I had to go for a walk to clear my head, so I went down to the river. That's my safe place.

Jesus was sitting there with a few friends a little distance from me. He, and a couple friends, were on their way through Bethany, with a batch of olive wood. They stopped to have some hummus and chips for lunch. He left his friends and came over to me and simply looked at me with those eyes of compassion. You know how someone can look at you and they can see right through you? You can tell they know every thought and every feeling you have. It was like that. But I didn't feel afraid. In fact, I felt completely comfortable. He didn't say a word, but just sat down looking at the water with me for a bit and I could feel my burden easing as we sat there.

I had never seen him before so, looked over at him and asked "Who are you?" He said he was Jesus of Nazareth. He was only in his mid 20s at the time, but I could tell he was wise and so kind. We became instant friends.

I invited him and his friends over but he said he couldn't because he needed to get the olive wood back home. But he assured me he'd come back to see me and he wanted to meet my sisters.

A week later, Jesus came back to visit by himself. Martha, Mary, Jesus and I sat through the afternoon that day telling stories about growing up in Galilee and so many other things. Somehow, every conversation deepened my love for God. It was like we had known each other our whole lives.

Jesus visited every week for several months after mum and dad died. We had lots of friends and other family around, but it was Jesus' friendship that really got all of us through.

A few years later, Jesus became a rabbi. We had a good laugh about that, let me tell you! He began preaching to crowds throughout the area and his reputation began growing because he spoke about God like nobody else. He kept talking about God's kingdom. For the longest time I didn't really understand what he was getting at. We didn't see him quite as much for a few years, but he'd still stop by with his disciples whenever he was coming through. I think he needed a break from all of the preaching he was doing. I'd joke

with him about how he was trying to become famous and all and he would always laugh. We all knew that becoming famous was the last thing on his mind.

Jesus was like family.

Then, several months ago, I started getting sick. I had an awful bad temperature. It was just like how our parents got sick all over again. Nobody knew what to do. I vaguely remember the village doctor coming over and I know he told Martha and Mary that I was going to die. They started to cry and I couldn't bear how much they were hurting.

We had lots of friends over during that time. But it was Martha's idea to send for Jesus. He had helped so many people and if anyone could help me to get better she was sure that it was him. I knew that Jesus was busy, but if I was going to die, I felt like it would be good to have him there. Martha insisted that he could make me better. She was so sure of this.

But I kept getting worse. I was unconscious with the awful fever and never remember Jesus coming. They say he never did make it before I died but honestly those days were foggy for me.

They told me that I had been dead for four days before Jesus finally arrived.

What I remember was after I died I felt light and being surrounded by God's love. There was no more fear or concern about anything. Then I was in a green field near the river, but it was different from the river in Bethany.

And my parents were there. I saw them walking toward me and we hugged and cried. We talked for what seemed like days, although I never remember the sun going down and I can't even tell you what we talked about. It was simply all love. It was so good to see them again. Now, I only remember one thing they said. They said that I needed to go back — that God had more for me to do.

Then things got foggy, my parents faded, and I heard Jesus calling me "Lazarus, come! Lazarus!" He was calling me and I felt strength return to my body. I felt my skin and my body. I felt hungry. I was all wrapped up laying on a cold stone. People came and unwrapped me and I saw Jesus standing there with tears in his eyes and his arms open wide. I know that I smelled bad, but he embraced me with such warmth. I don't recall a more wonderful feeling.

As he hugged me, he whispered in my ear, “Lazarus, we have work to do” he said. And he smiled at me. I said “I know. I have to share my story and let people know that you hold the keys to real life, life that not even death can take away!”

So, here I am sharing this story with everyone I can. I know that my neck is on the line with the chief priests, and that is okay with me. There is nothing they can really do to me. But I have to avoid them so that I can keep sharing my story with more people. That is my life mission now — building Jesus’ kingdom! I finally understand what Jesus was talking about.

Our God is the God of the living and not even death has control over us. So, we might be afraid from time to time, but that doesn’t have to stop us. That is so clear to me now. There is no reason to be timid. God is always with us! God’s love is here right now!

Everything is different with Jesus now. Being with Jesus has given me so much courage. He says that he’s heading to Jerusalem for Passover, even with all of the chief priests after him — like they are after me. And Jesus’ courage gives me courage. Even if they kill Jesus and kill me, I know it won’t be the end. Look at me, I am living proof of that!

Well, I am going to go with him to Jerusalem no matter what the cost — to help him build his kingdom of love and true joy. There is no power in this world greater than God’s love, not even Rome’s!

Would you like to help build God’s kingdom of love and joy too?
Great!

This is my story about how my life journey was changed by meeting of Jesus. You probably have a different story. What is the story of your life journey? How have you been changed by meeting Jesus?

Jesus has such a great sense of humor, so walking the road with him means that we can keep a sense of humor too. So, do you want to hear another joke?

On the Ark, Noah probably got milk from the cows, but what did he get from the ducks? Quakers!

One more. Who was the greatest comedian in the scriptures? No, it isn’t me, although I am working on it. It was Samson, because he brought down the house!