

## **The Seven Signs of John's Gospel: The Raising of Lazarus John 11:1,3-27, 37-46**

I was out walking the other morning and I got chatting to a retired gentleman who I regularly see and as we got to his house I remarked on his garden and he told me just how shallow the topsoil is around here and how hard the clay is immediately under it that seems to work its way easily to the top. Which made digging it difficult along with gardening in general. He said his children were professionals who were not much help when it came to the garden. It reminded me of the story I heard once of an elderly man who lived alone and wanted to dig over his very large garden where he grew a lot of potatoes, but it was backbreaking work, and his son who used to help him was recently sent to prison.

The old man mentioned this in a letter he sent to his son. He wrote, "I'm not sure exactly what to do. I'm just getting too old to be digging up my garden plot of solid soil. It looks like I won't be able to plant the garden this year after all."

A few days later, he received a letter from his son, "Dad, for heaven's sake, don't dig up the garden plot this year, that's where we hid the all the loot from the robbery!"

At 6 a.m. the next morning, a large contingent of police arrived at his property to look for the stolen loot. After digging in the garden nearly all day, they gave up and even apologised to the old man, and left. A few days later the elderly father received another letter from his son. "Dear Dad, under the circumstances, that's the best I can do. You should be able to plant your potatoes now."

Sometimes we are like the solid soil or unforgiving clay earth of Drury. A stubbornness that stands in the way of experiencing a fully transformed life in Jesus Christ, the son of God, our Saviour. Instead of trusting God, fully believing in his son Jesus Christ, in all that he has said and done, instead of taking his commandments and promises to heart we let our fleshly thinking and human attitudes take control of our life to the point of even hardening our hearts. When we do this we do not allow for the garden of our hearts to be dug over, prepared for cultivation just as we need to prepare our gardens in springtime in Drury.

We remain therefore a potential garden in need of being turned over, tilled by the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life- by

Christ Jesus himself. As those loved by God and acquainted with good gardening practices we each need to be aware that an un-tilled garden will harden over time.

In the natural there is the forecast of a hot dry summer coming after this spring that will harden the earth and develop lots of cracks in it. Just as we prepare our gardens in spring to meet the demands of such a summer, and will continue to tend them so that our gardens will not only survive, but flourish in the adverse conditions and produce for us. It is the same spiritually because Jesus wants to do some digging in the garden of our own hearts this morning preparing us to cultivate faith and belief in him, along with trust and confidence in God's word just as he did with his 12 disciples, and with Mary and Martha, even the Jews in this miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead. A sign that that reveals to us and is designed along with the other six that we have covered in John's Gospel to point us to the gospel truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. All we have to do is believe!

The Greek word for *believe* in our story [vv15, 25, 26, 27, 40 & 42] is the verb, *pisteou*, and is used nearly 100 times by John in this gospel. It is something very important that John is trying to get across to one and all as something that we must actively engage in and 'do' because faith requires action. And for you and for me it simply requires that with a firm conviction that fully acknowledges God's revelation of the truth- we believe!

The concept behind the belief that Jesus is talking about is like when we decide to *take people at their word, trusting that what they say is true*. Now there is no religious "faith" in the world that gives anywhere nearly as much importance to *believing* the right thing as Christianity does. And it is no wonder because believing or having faith in Christ grants us salvation, the greatest life-giving miracle of all! The gift of eternal life through salvation in Christ is meant to cultivate and grow in us in such a way that it takes over our entire being- how we think, speak and act because we are now to be operating from a Godly perspective as we have the deposit of eternity living within us, the Holy Spirit. And what we believe now, determines how we live our lives every day.

Genuine faith, what we believe, will be evidenced by truly believing in God, by taking God at His Word, beginning with believing in your salvation by faith in Christ alone, by surrendering and committing

your life to follow him as an obedient disciple. Now such a faith is not merely following a family tradition or nominally adhering to just some of Christ's teaching and snippets of Biblical morality.

Such a limited belief does not allow God in Jesus to save you and transform your heart so that you can live a life surrendered to Him. If it did then God would be a liar whereas God would like to be taken at His Word. God doesn't like to be made out to be a liar. Neither do we. God wants to be *believed*. He wants us to have faith only in Him, His Son and not in natural, worldly and human rational thinking and philosophical thought. In our story today Jesus gets to challenge this realm of thinking with the miracle that points as a sign that by believing you may have life in his name.

In vv25-26 Jesus was making a declaration concerning His divine nature stating that he does more than give life; that in fact he Jesus is life, and therefore death has no ultimate power over Him. And what's more he confers this spiritual life on those who believe in Him, so that they too will share in His triumph over death. So he Jesus, therefore truly is the Resurrection and the Life because he offers life to everyone who believes in him, both now and for evermore, meaning they will never die. Apart from Jesus there is no resurrection, apart from Christ, there is no eternal life for He is both the Resurrection and the Life.

And After Jesus makes this statement he asks Martha this simple question, "Do you believe this?" And her response [v.27] was that of a well dug over, prepared and cultivated heart, "Yes Lord I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." Jesus' Word and Martha's belief after many tears are put into action. Just a few verses later Jesus commanded those present at the Tomb of Lazarus to "take away the stone". To which Martha is quick to point out that he will smell quite strong. Which does not deter Jesus who had especially waited four days so that his disciples and friends whom he loved dearly, so that even the Jews might believe and see the glory of God v.40. So they obey and take the stone away. And then Jesus prayed with a loud voice those infamous words, "Lazarus come out!"

Jesus is the Word, the Word made flesh. The Word spoken of in the Scriptures that brought creation into being, and he is the same Word that heals the sick, and, raises the dead! He speaks these

words outside the tomb and Lazarus who had begun to decay from four days in the tomb comes forth.

What a sight it would have been. Jewish tradition at the time was that the corpse was laid on a linen sheet that was twice the length of the body, half the sheet was underneath and the other half on top. The feet were bound at the ankles. The arms were tied to the body with linen strips and the face was bound with separate cloth. Lazarus could hop and shuffle at best as he left the tomb, he could hardly walk, but however he did it, he came forth at Jesus' Word! Lazarus at that moment was called to a restoration of a mortal life. This morning we can ask, "How many of us need a restoration?" How many of us need the hardened soil of our hearts tilled by God?

In the natural realm of life we often only trust that which we can see, hear or touch. Yet nothing here on this earth will last. In fact, all things earthly are temporary. Nothing on this earth is eternal. This physical body is temporary. Your physical bodies are temporary. Do not seek that which is material, do not put your trust in that which is earthly. But if you believe, you will see the glory of God. These are words of trust.

Earth is not our eternal home. When we leave this side of eternity when we leave our life on this planet in the universe then we will reach home because Our Name is Written There. Our citizenship is there. Our Saviour is there. Our spiritual inheritance is there.

And our Lord is clear on how we obtain this eternal life:  
"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? Do you believe that he is the resurrection and the life? And importantly, are you experiencing the fullness of this life? You see if you desire this fullness then the challenge remains to remove the stone that lies in front of the tomb and holds in those things that are suppressing your spirit, those things that are keeping you from living a full life in Jesus Christ. In today's story the people obeyed Jesus and removed the stone from the tomb of death. And that is what faith is all about. Removing, yielding every aspect of our life to allow Jesus to be Lord, Lord of all. It may even involve as in our story today shedding a few tears, as we believe in faith as a disciple who trusts and still follows Christ no matter what the circumstance.

Faith does not mean that we will not experience and feel pain, or weakness, that we will not feel brokenness. Faith does not even mean that we must fully understand. Faith means that in spite of death, in spite of adversity, in spite of tears, that our trust remains in God. For we believe that he is the resurrection and the life!

The scriptures tell us that God will raise up his disciples on the last day, but do you know what? God can also raise us up on this day! So, do you want a deeper relationship with God? Well... Do you believe in him? Do you truly trust him?

Whether you fully do or do not, today is the day to Seek Jesus. Ask him to open up the gates of heaven and fill you to overflowing with a resurrection life, a life that you need and a life that your spirit within longs for. If we are truly a resurrection people, then we must yield this flesh and we each must move to a life of,  
“Not my will but thy will be done.”

Lazarus at Jesus' command was freed from bandages and the ties of his grave clothes. God wants to release each of us from all bondage. Christ came to set us free from the power of sin and death. But not only that, in this life he wants to set you free from every bandage that ties you up and encapsulates you from within the tomb that enslaves you. He is the word made flesh that calls each of us to a resurrection life. He has called us to let the stone that covers the tomb in our life be rolled away!

**To finish:**

Can you hear his command?

Can you hear his voice?

"Remove the stone and come out. Come out of the tomb and live a resurrection life. Do not let your heart be hardened as clay but allow the Holy Spirit to till you, to dig over and cultivate the soil of your heart. Roll away the stone that is keeping you bound."