

March 18, 2018

St. John 11:17-27:

***“The Journey That Must Be Made:
The Preview”***

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This past Wednesday, the celebrated physicist and self-proclaimed atheist Stephen Hawking died at the age of 76. The scientist told the *Guardian* in 2011 that death was never far from his mind: "I have lived with the prospect of death, but I'm in no hurry to die. I have so much I want to do first." As far as what happens after death, he had this to say in the same article: "I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark."

In our Gospel lesson for this morning, we have the record of an eye-witness by the name of John, the apostle. He was there, saw it all, heard the voice of Jesus, and watched as the dead man Lazarus walked out of the tomb alive. Many Jews were there to see it and hear it all. Some of them believed on account of the miracle, but others went to the Pharisees and told them all that had happened. There isn't a recorded account of a dispute over the veracity of this miracle. Rather, the enemies of Christ acknowledged his many signs. The problem was that they reasoned that Jesus would eventually get the attention of the Romans, and that the Romans would come and take away their positions and destroy the nation. They concluded that it would be better to get rid of Jesus. John writes, "So from that day on they made plans to put him to death." In fact, the evidence of the resurrection was so powerful and incontrovertible that they even planned to put Lazarus to death as well:

When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus (John 12:9-11).

In the account of Lazarus being raised from the dead, we are brought to consider the truth, that behind the brain is a person who will go on. Existence isn't just physical matter. It isn't merely a chemical reaction. And, when the brain stops working, when the so-called "components" fail, it isn't impossible for the Creator to put it all back together again in working order. There is an afterlife as Jesus himself clearly states: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." This was certainly not a fairy story for the people who were there, and saw Lazarus walking out of the tomb. It was not a fairy story when Jesus appeared to many after his own resurrection from the dead. Please notice the plural personal pronouns (*we*, *our*, *us*) when John writes:

That which was from the beginning, which *we* have heard, which *we* have seen with our eyes, which *we* looked upon and have touched with *our* hands, concerning the word of life - the life was made manifest, and *we* have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to *us* - that which *we* have seen and heard *we* proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with *us*; and indeed *our* fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And *we* are writing these things so that *our* joy may be complete (1 John 1:1-4).

Some people do call this whole thing “a fairy story for those afraid of the dark.” I happen to be one of the many who are very much afraid of meeting God in the darkness of my sin and guilt, apart from any remedy that he offers. The Bible makes it perfectly clear that physical death goes hand in hand with a real afterlife punishment of everlasting hell. I know it to be true because my conscience cries out a guilty verdict. I have not lived a perfect life, and there is the one who is perfect and has made me to be perfect, and I am not perfect at all, and I kick myself all of the time because I realize that I am not what I am supposed to be.

My thoughts testify to this all the time, and your thoughts too. The simple reality of the conscience, and the guilt and fright over leaving this life behind, makes it certain that there is some sort of accountability, unless of course we shut up the conscience. When our consciences pronounce us “guilty!” it causes us to either beat down the thoughts of punishment into silence, or to find a way around the punishment. Thanks be to God that we have the hope of the forgiveness of sin, and victory over death and hell through the life and cross of Jesus his only Son! There is a “not guilty” in Jesus and the hope of everlasting life.

When I “cross-examine” the witnesses in the Bible, I do not believe for a second that the resurrection of Lazarus and the crucifixion and victory of Jesus was a fairy story. In the Bible, we are confronted with a host of witnesses who saw what they saw first-hand, heard what they heard, touched what they touched, and died on the basis of their witness. That is extraordinary. And even more, it is through their witness and the work of the Holy Spirit that I miraculously am raised up to believe in such an incredible word. All of us can say it with Job, who was miraculously convicted by the promise of the Lord centuries before it even happened: “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me (Job 19:25-27)!”

Well . . . I have to admit that when I was in my office writing and reviewing my sermon at this point, I realized that I was on the verge of writing an Easter sermon instead of a sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent. Still, lest we all forget, our overall theme is **The Journey That Must Be Made**. And today, we are given **The Preview**. The preview is found in this amazing account of a man by the name of Lazarus. What we see in Lazarus is inextricably linked to Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection. If Jesus was able to do what he did for Lazarus, then what do you think all of the disciples should have realized when their Master was put to death on the cross and buried in a tomb? They should have known that their teacher was the master over sin and death. They should have known that death and the tomb was not going to hold him. And, even more, what does this say to us? If Jesus rose Lazarus from the dead, and if Jesus himself rose from the dead, and we believe in Jesus, we also will rise!

The point is that what we see in Lazarus is an amazing preview of something much bigger. First of all, it was a mini-picture of Holy Week. Secondly, it stands as a preview of what is to come for all of us who physically die in Jesus, just as Lazarus did. As Jesus said to Lazarus, “Come out!” so will he give the command for all of us to come out. However, unlike the preview, we will not be raised only to retain a mortal body and die again, but we shall be raised unto immortality. It is real. The apostle Paul writes:

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied (1 Corinthians 15:12-19).

Please keep in mind that this was the same apostle Paul who at one time set out to destroy the entire Christian church because he did not believe in Jesus Christ. But, never ever forget, that this is the same apostle Paul who saw the resurrected Lord on the road to Damascus, and his life was turned upside down, and he did more than perhaps all the other apostles combined to further the message of the resurrection of Jesus Christ to the four corners of the world. He literally lost his head over it. Please allow me to paraphrase what Paul is saying in the quote I read a moment ago:

“I have written to you and testify that Jesus has risen from the dead. I have seen him and have talked with him. Not only would I be cruel to say these things to you if all of it were not true, but I would be exceedingly cruel to myself, for ever since I saw him, talked to him, and now testify about him, my life has been hell on earth because of him. Furthermore, if what I say to you isn't true, what a waste! We are lost in our sins and have wasted our lives. If Jesus is all a great, big lie, and this is our one shot at life, then we should be pitied above all the rest.”

So, what do you think? Is it a fairy story? No. It is our Journey with Jesus our Savior, from Death to Everlasting Life!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott