
Lazarus, Come Forth: Call and Response

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Fifth Sunday in Lent – Year A

Lazarus, come forth!
...The dead man came forth.
John 11:1-45

Sometimes, when the preacher proclaims from the pulpit, or asks a question from the pulpit, they want you to ponder an answer silently in your heart. But today is different! Today, I want you to respond verbally!. Today, whenever I say, "Lazarus, come forth," I want you to respond: "The dead man came forth."

"Lazarus, come forth!"
"The dead man came forth."

Excellent. That is called "call and response." It makes for lively religion. Let's try it again:

"Lazarus, come forth."
"The dead man came forth."

"Call and response," though, is not just a lively sermon. Call and response is the eternal pattern of religious relationship. For religion is always about relationship, about being connected, about being connected to God and to each other, about being connected to faithful community.

God calls us to grace and new life, again and again. But we do not experience that grace and new life until we make an active response. When our will meets God's grace, salvation occurs. This is the eternal pattern of religious relationship:

Lazarus come forth.
The dead man came forth.

Throughout the history of salvation, God has called forth. At creation itself, God formed the earth from an empty void. God said, "Let there be light, and there was light." And God said, "Let there be life, and there was life." And God said,

Lazarus come forth.
The dead man came forth.

In the time of the patriarchs and matriarchs, when Abraham and Isaac and Jacob were offered the incredible promise of grace, they had to wander into new territory, willing to live into the blessing which God had promised. God said to them,

Lazarus come forth.
The dead man came forth.

In the time of the prophets, when the prophets sought to comfort God's people, when the prophets critiqued and challenged the dead bones, God cried out, "Behold, I am about to do a new thing. I will make rivers in the

desert. I will send spirit into the valley of dry bones."

Lazarus, come forth.

The dead man came forth.

In the time of Jesus, after Jesus had taught and healed, after Jesus had suffered and had been crucified, after he had lain in the tomb three days, God called out,

Lazarus, come forth.

The dead man came forth.

Through the early centuries of the persecuted church, when the great empires sought to extinguish the outcast little Christian church, and later when people thought the Christian Church was crushed dead by marauders and rogues, God was faithful in proclaiming,

Lazarus come forth.

The dead man came forth.

Yes, even today. Even today, in our own time, when the ignorant folks have slandered the church herself, when folks have said the church will die, when internal despisers have accused our own Episcopal Church of dying, God has said,

Lazarus, come forth.

The dead man came forth.

And, today, in your own time, the call of God is always faithful, no matter what else is going on in your life. And the call of God always needs response.

Listen closely to this passage in the Gospel of John about the raising of Lazarus, with people of high anxiety worrying and weeping all around Lazarus.

When the person you love, and the one who really loves you so much. When that person seems not to be coming immediately to your aid. When he refuses to drop what he is doing and scurry to you, even then the voice of God says,

Lazarus, come forth.

And the dead man came forth.

When people are crying all around you, and you are, too. When all they can do is have pity, the voice of God says,

Lazarus, come forth.

The dead man came forth.

When people say, "You're a loser. You've been dead for three days. You have a stench. In fact, you stink. You've been dead for three years. You've been dead for thirty years. You really stink. You've been dead all your life." When the resisters in your life argue death, the voice of God says,

Lazarus, come forth.

The dead man came forth.

In the Bible, the story of Lazarus reminds us that resurrection is not a one-time thing. It did not happen only once, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Resurrection and new life are happening in the Bible all the time.

At the end of today's gospel passage, Jesus said something else. He called forth something else. When Lazarus did indeed come forth, covered and bound in bandages, Jesus said to them, "Unbind him; let him go."

"Unbind him."

"Let him go!"

I might like these words more than I like "Lazarus, come forth." Indeed, these words may be more powerful than the words "Come forth!"

Those could be our words every new day. Unbind somebody. Where you find someone in bandages: your

friend, your wife, your husband, your companion, even the stranger. Where you find someone struggling to be free, unbind them and let them go. Do not keep them tangled up in the old affairs of sin and death. Those clothes constrict and make all of us ill.

If we refuse to let someone go, when we refuse to forgive, if we refuse to see new life, it is we who are keeping them dead. The community has that power. Jesus, therefore, proclaims to all of us, "*Unbind him. Let him go.*"

Those are the powerfully concluding words of today's gospel. Don't hold on to the past. Do not hold on to sin. Do not hold on to death!

Let someone go today. Call them from the grave. And then release them!

Yes, resurrection is happening in our own lives all the time! Whenever we hear the words, "Lazarus, come forth!" well, "The dead man comes forth."

Lazarus, come forth.

The dead man came forth.

AMEN.