

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 21, 2021**

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS:
MIRACLE AT BETHANY
John 10 (Selected Verses)**

When we began this series of messages on *Travels with Jesus*, I mentioned *Travels with Charley*, John Steinbeck's 1962 book about his journey across America with his dog Charley. You may be interested in knowing that historian and author Nathaniel Philbrick has a new book out called *Travels with George: In Search of Washington and His Legacy*, which I may have to add to the increasingly long list of books I want to read someday.

In our travels with Jesus, we have not looked at every account in the Gospels of every place Jesus visited in the three short years of His public ministry. For example, there is Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4; the healing of the invalid at the pool of Bethesda in John 5; and Jesus' wise and grace-filled handling of the situation with the woman caught in adultery in John 8. The list could go on and on.

But for now, we come to the end of the travels of Jesus. Jerusalem was His final earthly destination, and He was almost there. The decisive moments of the final week of His life and ministry would take place there, from His triumphal entry into the city on Palm Sunday, to the last supper with His disciples in the Upper Room, His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, His trials before the Jewish Sanhedrin and Roman governor Pilate, His crucifixion and burial on Good Friday, and His resurrection from the dead on the third day.

Our focus today is on one of the final events that took place before Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He had been in the city previously for one of the Jewish feasts – the Feast of Dedication (John 10:22) – but left Jerusalem and retreated across the Jordan River because of threats against His life (John 10:31-42).

While east of the Jordan, He received word from His dear friends Martha and Mary that their brother Lazarus was seriously ill. Reading between the lines in John 11, Martha and Mary clearly hoped Jesus would come and heal their brother. The story in John 11 can be divided into four parts. Think of a play with four acts:

Act I: Lazarus is sick. (Read John 11:1-7.)

Act II: Lazarus is dead. (Read John 11:11-16.)

Act III: Jesus goes to Bethany. (Read John 11:17-37.)

Act IV: Jesus raises Lazarus to life. (Read John 11:38-44).

Before we take a closer look at this "Miracle at Bethany," I want you to notice something about the outline and structure of the Gospel of John. John describes seven miraculous signs performed by Jesus prior to His suffering, death, and resurrection, all seven of

which point to His identity as the true Messiah and Son of God, and which put the glory of God on display.

Here are the seven miracles in the Gospel of John:

1. Turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1-11). In John 2:11, John gives this summary statement: “This, the first of His miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed His glory, and His disciples put their faith in Him.”
2. The healing of the son of a royal official in Capernaum (John 4:46-54). Jesus was in Cana when the boy’s father begged Him to go to Capernaum to heal his son. Jesus did not go with him, but simply spoke the word – from a distance – and the boy was healed. “”This,” says John, “was the second miraculous sign that Jesus performed, having come from Judea to Galilee” (4:54).
3. The healing of the paralyzed man who had been at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem for 38 years, waiting to be healed (John 5:1-15).
4. The feeding of the 5,000, multiplying five small barley loaves and two small fish to feed a huge crowd (John 6:1-14).
5. Jesus’ walking on water, on the Sea of Galilee (John 6:16-21).
6. The healing of a man born blind (John 9:1-7).
7. The raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-44), which was the final miracle of Jesus prior to the events of the last week of His life.

Other miracles are recorded in the Gospels, starting with the miraculous conception of Jesus and the pregnancy of Mary through the supernatural agency of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:18-25). But John chose to highlight these seven miracles in his Gospel witness to the person and saving work of Jesus.

Following his account of the resurrection of Jesus, John makes this statement: “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah), the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:30-31).

It is all about Jesus. It is all about who He is and what He did. And about how each one of us responds to Him as He is offered to us in the gospel. It is by believing in His name, by trusting in Him as Savior and Lord of your life, that you receive and experience the gift of eternal life that death cannot snuff out.

These miracles, including the raising of Lazarus from the dead, are *real* miracles. If you’re old enough, no doubt you remember Al Michaels’ iconic exclamation in the final

seconds of the US Olympic Hockey Team's upset of the Soviet Union in the 1980 Winter Olympics: "Do you believe in miracles? Yes!" An actual "miracle" or not, it sure did seem miraculous, given what huge underdogs the Americans were.

If you're even older (like me), you may remember a TV commercial from the 1960s for Xerox copiers in which a monk (whose job was presumably to copy manuscripts by hand), flabbergasted by seeing a Xerox machine copy documents instantly, exclaims: "It's a miracle!" Modern technology *is* astonishing, but not miraculous in the true sense of the word.

The dictionary defines a miracle as an "extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs" (Webster's). C.S. Lewis explained that a miracle is something unique that breaks a pattern so expected and established that we hardly consider the possibility that it could be broken (Eric Metaxas, *Miracles*, 11-12). Like, for example, Mary's pregnancy apart from any involvement with a man, or bringing a dead man back to life.

I hope you will agree with me that the raising of Lazarus from the dead *was* a miracle. Usually, when a person dies, we don't expect them to come back to life – not this side of the promised day of resurrection at the end of history, when all of us who belong to Christ will receive our resurrection bodies and will live with our King forever. This side of heaven, we don't expect a dead person to come back to life. *But that really happened in the case of Lazarus.*

There are four main characters in this story. There are the sisters, Martha and Mary. There is their brother Lazarus. And there is Jesus. Martha and Mary are in the spotlight in Luke 10:38-42, where Jesus has come to their home for a visit. Mary eagerly sits at the feet of Jesus listening as He teaches, while Martha is consumed with everything to be done to be a good hostess. When Martha complains to Jesus that Mary should be helping her, Jesus replies that Mary has chosen what is better and more important.

Martha was a doer. When there was something to be done, she did it. She was an activist. Serving was the way she most often expressed her love for others and for God. She was a woman of sincere faith as well. Her faith in Jesus is obvious in the interchange between the two of them in verses 21-27. Listen to the back-and-forth again:

Martha: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (I think what she was really saying is: "I'm really upset that you took so long to get here. If only you had come right away, this would never have happened.")

Jesus: "Your brother will rise again."

Martha: "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." (Which is true, but not what Jesus had in mind.)

Jesus: “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live” – will have a life that continues on after death – “and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” – will never experience the ultimate death. Physical death, yes; but not spiritual death.

Not content to leave it in the realm of the intellect, Jesus pressed the issue home with Martha: “Do you believe this?” (In the Greek: *Pisteueis touto?*)

To which Martha replied: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ (Messiah), the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

As much grief as Martha takes for being distracted and preoccupied when Jesus came to visit in Luke 10, we need to acknowledge and affirm the measure of genuine faith she expresses here in the aftermath of her brother’s death.

Mary, for her part, is the one Jesus commends in Luke 10, having chosen to be with Jesus and to give Him her full attention. Her devotion to Jesus is also on display in John 12:1-3, after the raising of Lazarus, at a dinner held in Jesus’ honor. While Martha (characteristically) serves Jesus and the other guests, Mary takes a bottle of expensive perfume and pours it on the feet of Jesus and then wipes His feet with her hair. It is a gesture of love that Jesus interprets as preparation for His burial.

Lazarus was the brother of Martha and Mary. Which one was the oldest sibling, we don’t know. What we do know is that while Lazarus was not one of the twelve disciples, he was a dear friend of Jesus. As were his sisters.

His sickness resulted in his death. But, as Jesus says in verse 5, it would not end in death. Jesus did not say that Lazarus wouldn’t die. What He said was that death would not be the end of the story. Death would not have the last word. So, when Jesus arrived and found that Lazarus had already been dead for four days, and when He saw grief and heartache and sorrow engulfing Martha and Mary and those mourning with them, “He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled” (11:33). It is difficult to know exactly what the original Greek words mean in this context, but they suggest that Jesus was moved with profound sorrow by the death of His friend, along with the grief felt by Martha and Mary, and that, at another level, He felt anger over the ravages of sickness and death caused by the sin-virus that infects every person and taints everything in this world.

Jesus was visibly upset, to the point that, in verse 35, John says: “Jesus wept.” Two words. The shortest verse in the Bible. It is three words in Greek: *edakrusen ho Iesous*. This is the only place in the New Testament where the verb *dakruo* (to weep) occurs. (The noun form *dakru* or *dakruon*, which means “tears,” is used 11 times in the New Testament.) “Jesus wept.” This is one of the clearest indications we have of the true humanity of Jesus. He felt deeply. He was moved to tears. Not crocodile tears. Not the phony-baloney tears of a hypocrite. Nor the tears of a clown. The tears of Jesus were the real thing. They came from His heart. Jesus knew sorrow. He was familiar with grief (Isaiah 53:3). He understands what we feel. And He was not afraid to let the tears flow.

I don't like to cry. But sometimes, as most of you know, I can't help it. Sometimes I can't stop the tears from coming. They just come. So, I'm preaching to myself when I say: If Jesus thought it was okay to cry, it must be okay to cry. If Jesus could cry and not be embarrassed about it, it must be okay to cry without being embarrassed by it. I still feel embarrassed when I cry, but the Lord is helping me with it. If tears come easily to you and you need help dealing with it, the Lord will help you, too.

I want you to see, though, that the story doesn't end with the tears of Jesus, any more than with Lazarus still dead and in the tomb. In Act IV of the story (11:38-44), Jesus goes to the tomb where the body of Lazarus has been laid. Lazarus has already been dead four days and, the fragrance of the spices with which he was buried notwithstanding, there is little doubt that by now the smell emanating from the tomb would not be pleasant. In verse 39 Martha uses the verb *οζο*, which means "to stink" or "to smell bad." This is the only time this word is used in the entire New Testament. Jesus asks to have the stone removed from the entrance to the tomb, but Martha, ever the practical one, protests. After Jesus reminds her that her faith will be rewarded by seeing the glory of God, she acquiesces.

The stone is removed, after which Jesus prays. He does not pray to ask the Father to give Him the power to bring Lazarus back to life. Jesus already has the power. He knows what He is going to do. And He knows how it will turn out. He knows that when He calls Lazarus by name, Lazarus *will* come out. The prayer of Jesus is a prayer of thanksgiving to God the Father and a witness to the special relationship between the Father and the Son. Then, Jesus speaks directly to Lazarus, calling to him in a *phone megale* – a loud (mega) voice – to come out of the tomb. Out he comes, wrapped from head to toe in his burial cloths, back from the dead, alive again through the miracle-working power of Jesus.

Almost 100 years ago, one of America's most renowned playwrights, Eugene O'Neill, wrote a play called *Lazarus Laughed*. The play is about the life of Lazarus after Jesus raised him from the dead. As the title suggests, the most characteristic feature of his life after his first experience of death was laughter. Joyful laughter. Lazarus looked death in the face and discovered that as a follower of Jesus, death is not something to be feared, because on the other side of death is the joyful presence and undying love of our gracious Heavenly Father.

This miraculous sign, the seventh in the Gospel of John, was met with mixed reviews. Many who saw or heard what Jesus did, or who knew about Lazarus' death and subsequently saw him alive again, put their faith in Jesus. Others, however, saw Jesus as a threat to their positions of privilege and power, who must be neutralized. So, as John tells us in verse 53, "from that day on they" – the Sanhedrin, the ruling religious council in Jerusalem – "plotted to take His life."

The raising of Lazarus was a miracle. No question about it. But his rising from the dead was not the same as the resurrection of Jesus. Lazarus rose to die again. Jesus rose to live

forever. Lazarus was raised with the same mortal body which had already died once. Jesus rose with a glorified, immortal resurrection body that will never die.

The Bible is clear that death is the destiny of every person. Unless Jesus comes back first, all of us will die. But we can face death with confidence – even laughter – because we have a Savior who has kicked death's butt 😊, a Sovereign who has promised that we will share in His resurrection life.

Do you believe this?

Lord, let it be so. Let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.