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First Presbyterian Church, Willmar, MN
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"For God's Glory"
John 11: 1-44


The Death of Lazarus

11 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

7 Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' ⁸The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' ⁹Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' ¹¹After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' ¹²The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

Jesus the Resurrection and the Life

17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you



ask of him.' ²³Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' ²⁴Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' ²⁵Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' ²⁷She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

Jesus Weeps

28 When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' ³⁷But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Jesus Raises Lazarus to Life

38 Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

A few days ago many of you gathered here in our sanctuary and we spread ashes on our foreheads in the shape of a cross. We intoned the ancient words of tradition, "from dust you have come, to dust you shall return." We pondered the impermanence of life. We remembered that we are mortal beings and our time is short. We remembered that we are fashioned out of the very dust of the earth – the atoms and molecules of the environment form us. And to it we shall return.

I was pondering this the other day when I was watching a science program about the formation of the universe. And as I watched I pondered the question of where all this came from. Science tells us that the stuff of the universe came from the Big Bang, an event 13.8 billion years ago when the universe began in a massive explosion of energy. From this explosion the first atoms formed in great cosmic clouds of dust. Composed primarily of the lightest elements, hydrogen, helium, and lithium they formed enormous diffuse nebulae that characterized the early galaxy. Through gravity these clouds coalesced into the first stars, as the gases collapsed and nuclear fusion ignited. These stars burned the fuel of the light elements that composed them, and through fusion of these atom's nuclei the smaller elements became fused into larger ones. Two hydrogen became a single atom of helium. Two helium fused together became an atom of beryllium. The berylliums combined into oxygen and so on.

These ancient stars burned furiously as they consumed their store of initial fuel. This process continued for billions of years until they reached a critical point in their lifecycle when they had consumed all of their fuel. At that point the stars entered the end of their lives. Stars like ours would expand into a massive red giant that would be a hundreds of times its original size, before exploding outwards into a gaseous nebula, leaving behind a small core not much larger than planet earth called a white dwarf. Other, much more massive stars than ours would end their lives by first expanding into massive red giants, which are the largest objects in the universe before exploding in one of the most energetic events in all of cosmic history – a supernova. In a supernova, the contents of the stars inner core explode, spewing its contents outwards into a giant cloud of dust.

The curious thing about these supernovae is that we're learning they're the only cosmic mechanism that we're aware of that generates enough energy to explain the existence of any of the heavier elements. Any element heavier than

iron can only be formed in the death of an ancient star – a supernova. So what this means is such elements as copper, iron, lead, tin, iodine, mercury, calcium, and so on cannot exist without the death of an ancient star.

Since we know that our own solar system is approximately 4.6 billion years old, and that our planets and asteroids contain abundant amounts of these elements in their composition, we surmise that our solar system is formed from an ancient nebula which was itself the result of the death of an even more ancient star which went supernova.

This has fabulous and fascinating implications. So what that means is that all matter in our solar system is formed of stardust from an ancient solar system that predated our own. All the stuff of this earth and its solar system is formed from this cosmic dust. The atoms that compose the chair we sit upon this morning, the atoms composing the clothes we wear, the jewelry we adorn ourselves with, the atoms in the vehicle we rode in this morning – all of it used to be in the core of an ancient star that predated our solar system by billions of years. It only stands to reason then, that these same atoms compose not just all that stuff, but also us as well. What this means is that we are composed of the dust of ancient stars. To put it another way, we are composed of stardust. And if that is the case, we are starpeople.

The atoms inside you and me are ancient. They have existed for billions of years, and they will exist for billions of years to follow. They once may have inhabited the tissues of an ancient fern beside a primordial swamp. The atoms in your body may have coursed through the bloodstream of an ancient dinosaur. They may have even been in the bodies of ancient human ancestors. They have passed into and out of various forms and permutations throughout their history. These atoms of the stuff of creation. They are the stuff of all living things. They are the ashes of all things, they are the dust of all things. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. From dust you have come, to dust you shall return.

I cannot help but to reflect theologically upon this, and in light of the story of Lazarus, it's a perfect time to do so. In the history of our sun, I hope you heard that our sun is the result of a resurrection of sorts. The fuel that composed our star was once in the core of an even more ancient one that went supernova. In a sense, our sun's body is formed out of the ashes of an ancient sun. Not only that,

but the atoms that compose you and me, are likewise, reused and recycled throughout the ecosystem.

You might say that resurrection, of a type, is encoded into the universe. Now, I realize that Lazarus wasn't resurrected. He was resuscitated. He didn't get brought back to life to live forever. We know that he went on to experience another earthly death. But what we have here is something marvelous, because we have Jesus, the same one who is God with us, Immanuel, the word made flesh, demonstrating something amazing with bringing Lazarus back from the dead. He is demonstrating that he is the Lord of life, that there is no power that can separate us from the Love of that is in Christ Jesus. We are seeing that not even the most final of closed doors cannot be opened by Jesus, not even the door of a tomb. When you put all of this together what it does is stretch our understanding of who God is. Is our understanding of God large enough to encompass one who speaks and the universe explodes into being with the expansion of energy and atoms and stars which compose the universe. And is our conception of God big enough to include the fact that this same God walked with us, talked with us, taught us, and also called Lazarus forth from the tomb.

Not only do we need to stretch our concept of God to include the majesty of a cosmic God of the universe, of all creation, that spoke and moved and caused the universe to spring into being. But we need to stretch our understanding of God another way as well. And this is even more marvelous when you consider it – that this same God cares personally about you and me. We see it right here in this remarkable text. We see him come to Mary and wept with her at the tomb. We see our Savior feeling the depths of our pain. We see that the loss of his friend wounded him and caused him pain. Jesus weeps with us, knows the depths of our suffering. And this is a consistent theme – this idea of a personal savior who knows us, walks with us, and loves us. Look at the stories we've seen in John so far, Jesus celebrates the wedding feast with us, thirsts at the well with us, and now he's here at the graveside grieving with us.

All of this converges together – the God who is larger than we can conceive of, and more personal that we can comprehend – in this marvelous moment outside of Lazarus's tomb. Jesus assures Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,"²⁶ and everyone who

lives and believes in me will never die.” And he speaks and the lame walk, the blind see, and the dead return to life. As theologian Mark Achtemeier puts it, This remarkable passage “resonates with the hope presented in Psalm 23: even when life takes believers through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil, because God is with us. Such a connection is also reflected in Question 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism: “What is your only comfort in life and death?” The answer begins: “That I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ.”¹

The same Savior who has recycled and restored cosmic giants, and has preserved the ancient dust of ancient stars to move in our bodies and minds, speaks words of restoration, of healing, of resurrection. He is the resurrection and the life. May we believe in him and may we live.

Alleluia and Amen.

¹ Achtemeier, P. Mark. “Theological Perspective: John 11: 38-44.” From Feasting on the Gospels: John, Volume 2, Chapters 10-21. Marvis, Cynthia A. & Johnson, Elizabeth E. Eds. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville. 2015. p. 66.