

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Passion Sunday  
April 7, 2019  
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There are many reasons to think the account of the raising of Lazarus belongs to the Easter Season. Chief among these is the proclamation of our hope of resurrection based upon faith in Jesus Christ. Instead, we get the raising of Lazarus on the last available Sunday before Holy Week! Why? It is the seventh, last, and *greatest*, of the signs recorded in the Fourth Gospel. These seven signs are a signature characteristic of St John's gospel. They manifest the divine power of the Creator as *coextensive* in the incarnate Son. Reading St John, you understand the Lord Jesus is in charge. He is the One calling the shots. When He, or the evangelist, keeps repeating the phrase "My [or His] hour has not yet come" that means Jesus was pushing the buttons. And one of those buttons, the raising the Lazarus, triggered the response of the Jerusalem authorities to plan the Lord's death. A remarkable part of these events, and one often overlooked, is the Pharisees do not doubt what they are told about the raising of Lazarus. They only wonder what to do about it! Instead of falling on their knees to worship the Lord they only think of the political ramifications. Here is a front row case of political expedience trampling spiritual values. You can think of it when you recall the Democratic Party in the early 1960's abandoning the pro-life platform to make it easier to win elections.

The incident has all sorts of high points. The encounter with Martha on the Lord's arrival in Bethany is one. Jesus at the tomb is another. (That scene records the shortest verse in the Bible. "*Jesus wept.*") There is the dramatic moment when the Lord shouts out, "*Lazarus, come forth.*" If you recall the voice of God at Creation commanding "*Let there be light*" that would please the evangelist. Or the Lord at the Last Supper declaring "*This is My Body.*" And then mixed in are two moments of almost comic relief. One is before the stone is rolled away and the people warn "*Lord, by this time he stinketh.*" The other is when the young man Lazarus hobbled out of the tomb looking very much like an upright windup mummy still wrapped in grave cloths! As in the account of the Lord with the woman at the well, you can pick your favorite moment.

Even before Jesus set out for Bethany he declared "*If any man walk in the day he stumbleth not, because he seeth the light of this world.*" The Son of God is not

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giving us advice to “make hay while the sun shines.” As always in John’s Gospel, there is more behind the words! The disciples had just warned their Master Judaea was a dangerous place for Him. His declaration was a reply to their fears. Christ referred to daylight as the light of the world, and earlier, in Chapter Eight, He had described *Himself* as “The light of the World.” The disciples were being taught a lesson. And thanks to the Gospel *Prologue*, you and I are in on the teaching. That is where we were told of Jesus “*In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.*”

Once on a beautiful fall day in the Berkshires we hiked a trail to a summit ledge. From it we could look out on the five highest peaks in Massachusetts. It was a stunning view. We spent some time sitting at the ledge, had our lunch, took pictures, and chatted quietly with the few other hikers. We wanted to stay longer, but by 3:00pm it was time to leave. We knew the October sun would disappear behind the hills much earlier than the hour of sunset, and we would be coming down through the woods. We had no flashlight. In the dark we would not see obstacles. Without light it is easy to lose your way and become lost.

In the gospel, the man who walks by The Light of the World Who is Christ is secure against spiritual harm. The disciples do not need to worry about going into Judaea. To be with Christ is to be in the light. Light *in* us relates to our moral actions just as light *about* us guides our physical path.

The incident of the raising of Lazarus leaves a definite impression. It is not about taking a flashlight with you on a mountain hike! Jesus is concerned with the development of saving faith. Lazarus hobbled out of the tomb as if in a potato sack race because he would need those grave clothes. One day Christ would not intervene. Lazarus would die. Our Lord’s disciples, and the three family members at Bethany, already had faith. Even before the raising of Lazarus Martha had declared “*I know he will rise, in the resurrection at the last day.*” But the Lord’s desire is not just that we have faith in Him but that this faith is *advancing* all the time. Faith is something *becoming*. It is going somewhere. It is not a possession we have so much as something that *has us* and works in us.

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Christ the Light of the World intends to shine upon our souls. His grace illumines souls to see life clearly. Christ is a light upon our path when His light is *in* us. But He does not illuminate our way in order we may remain unconverted. It is by converting us that we see His light along our way. Saint Paul said it is *in our hearts* that God hath “Shined to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” We follow Christ first not by the steps our physical bodies may take but by the love of Him in our hearts. It is when we follow Christ in this way, which was first called “The Way” we too will walk not in darkness but have the light of life.