

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Passion Sunday
March 29, 2020

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The raising of Lazarus seems to be an Easter-theme gospel misplaced in Lent. It is a proclamation of our hope of resurrection based upon faith in Jesus Christ. So why do we hear it on the last available Sunday before Holy Week? The answer is the raising of Lazarus is the seventh, the last, and the *greatest*, of the signs recorded in the Fourth Gospel. These seven signs reveal the divine power of the incarnate Son as being coextensive with those of the Creator. *Like Father, like Son*. And the raising of Lazarus was the last straw! It motivated the Jerusalem authorities to plan the Lord's death. Part of the remarkable testimony of the gospel is that the Pharisees do not *doubt* what they are told about the raising of Lazarus. They only wonder what to do about it! Here is a text-book example of political expedience riding roughshod over spiritual values.

The raising of Lazarus has all sort of high points and you can pick your favorite moment. There is the encounter with Martha on the Lord's approach to Bethany. Jesus at the tomb is another, where we have the shortest verse in the Bible: *Jesus wept*. The most dramatic moment recalls the very moment of creation, when the voice of Almighty God commanded, "Let there be light." At Bethany, the Son of God shouts out, "Lazarus, come forth." Then there is a moment of comic relief. Lazarus hobbled out of the tomb looking like a mummy still wrapped in grave cloths!

But the Good News is not for our entertainment. As always in St John's Gospel there is more behind the words! Even before setting out for Bethany, the Lord said, "If any man walk in the day he stumbleth not, because he seeth the light of this world." The disciples had just warned their Master Judaea was a dangerous place for Him. He replied to their fears. Christ referred to daylight as the light of the world. Earlier, in Chapter Eight, He had described *Himself* as "The Light of the World." The disciples were being taught a lesson, and St John's Gospel want us to learn it too.

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.

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I remember once on a beautiful fall day in the Berkshires we hiked a trail to a summit ledge from which we were able to look out on the five highest peaks in Massachusetts. It was a stunning view. We spent some time sitting at the ledge, having our lunch, taking pictures, and visiting with the few other hikers. Then it was time to go! Even though we were enjoying bright sunshine, we knew the autumn sun would disappear behind the hills much earlier than the hour of sunset and we would be hiking back down through dark woods. We had no flashlight, and in the fading light we would not see obstacles. Without light it was easy to lose your way and become lost.

The raising of Lazarus is not about taking a flashlight with you on a mountain hike! Jesus is concerned with the *development* of saving faith. Our Lord's disciples, and the three family members at Bethany, *already had faith*. Even before the raising of Lazarus Martha declared, "I know he will rise, in the resurrection at the last day." But Jesus took her faith further. He said "I am the Resurrection and the Life." The crucial thing Our Lord desired is that we not only *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. And in the Gospel, the Lord shows His desire that *all* might believe: not only His disciples and the Bethany siblings, but even the hostile Jews who were also present when Lazarus hobbled out of the tomb.

Christ the Light of the World intends to shine upon all souls. And souls illumined by His grace help all of us to see life clearly. The Lord is the light upon our path when His light is in us. But He does not illuminate our way just to leave us 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 first follow Christ not by the steps our physical bodies take, but by acts of obedience and the love of Him in our hearts. It is when we follow Christ this way we too will walk not in darkness but have *The Light of Life*.