

***The Seventh Sign of John***  
**By Dr. Dave Neale**

Today is the last Sunday of Lent, also known as Palm Sunday, which celebrates the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem before the Passion. Tomorrow begins Holy Week. I'd like to talk about what the raising of Lazarus means in relation to Holy Week.

You may recall there are seven miracles, or "signs", as John calls them in his Gospel which reveal Jesus' identity to us:

- Water into wine at the wedding (new covenant);
- Healing the royal official's son (gentile inclusion in the gospel);
- healing the lame man (grace over law);
- feeding the 5000 (Jesus is the bread of heaven, spiritual food; ***I am the bread of life***);
- walking on water (Jesus' lordship over creation);
- healing the man blind from birth (spiritual enlightenment; ***I am the light of the world***);<sup>i</sup>

And today we come to ***The Seventh Sign of John***. I thought you might like the sort of Dan Brown vibe with my title!

We speak, of course, of the raising of Lazarus of Bethany from the dead (victory over death). This seventh and last sign is the pinnacle of Jesus' ministry to people. It is the Everest Summit miracle of his life.

This astonishing event takes place in what I call the Resurrection Zone. I use this phrase to capture what was a *once-in-history period* when the divine was piercing the human veil with *once-in-history* events.

The Zone includes the Lazarus event, the triumphal entry to Jerusalem, the Last Supper, the arrest, death and resurrection of Jesus. The Holy Presence is among humanity in a singular, once-in-history way.

It is those few *weeks* before the final Passover, and, I would include those few *months* after, culminating in Pentecost; roughly two months.

This brief season on earth epitomizes what the Bible calls "the fullness of time." It is the time when the plan of God makes the great intervention in history.

***But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son...in order that we might receive adoption as children.***  
(Gal 4:5)

It isn't that the miraculous didn't occur outside of this time period. But never before and never since has God given the Holy Presence to humanity as he did in the Resurrection Zone. We are to understand that these events are the holiest time in eternity. We are on holy ground here.

As we come to the story of Lazarus, Jesus knows that he stands on the edge of, and is entering, the Resurrection Zone.

We don't know anything about Lazarus other than that Jesus "loved" him (11:3, 5, 36) and that he was Jesus' "friend" (11:11). He is, one says, the principal disciple of the Gospel of John. And yet we know nothing of him. Did he know the twelve?

The Resurrection Zone is inaugurated when, while still somewhere in Judea (11:7), Jesus said to his disciples, ***Lazarus is dead***. And then in Bethany when Jesus himself said, ***Remove the stone of the cave... and Lazarus! Come out!*** (11:14, 39, 43)

The setting is near Jerusalem, in Bethany. As Jesus approached this period, in the several weeks before the final Passover, his movements and behaviour became increasingly secretive. His activity is circumscribed by an impending sense of death.

And no wonder. It's been building for many chapters in John.<sup>ii</sup> It is throughout Matthew, Mark and Luke. ***I must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering... and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*** (Matt 16:21-23)

After the resurrection of Lazarus, Jesus withdraws into the wilderness. He no longer goes about openly (John 11:54). He retreats to an isolated region deep in the hills north of the Jerusalem; a place called Ephraim. It is hard to convey how remote this is. 25 miles north of Jerusalem.

According to John, the plot to arrest and kill Jesus is fully active (10:38), having been discussed among the "chief priests and Pharisees" in council (11:45ff). Caiaphas, the high priest himself, has declared that because of the attention Jesus is attracting, the risk of Roman intervention is probable. Something must be done. It's politics.

Here Caiaphas utters those ironic words ...***well, it is better for one man to die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.*** (John 11:49) Interestingly, John says Caiaphas is "prophesying" Jesus' coming death "for the nation."

The chief priests plan to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus (12:10). People are coming to see Jesus, but also *Lazarus* in these last days.

In fact, in John, the Lazarus event precipitates the events of Jesus' final week.

It's curious Lazarus never appears in the other gospels. Maybe the other gospel writers didn't know about Lazarus? His story is referred to nowhere else in the NT.<sup>iii</sup> Paul doesn't seem to know about the raising of Lazarus.

I wonder if, in fact, this event had been kept quiet – it was too explosive for that moment.

Martha, going out to meet Jesus when he returns to Bethany from Ephraim, ...***went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you" ... Now Jesus had not yet come into the village...*** (John 11:28-30)

It was not unknown for Jesus to admonish people he healed to keep it to themselves. Perhaps very few people knew, or knowing, kept it relatively quiet.

For John, the raising of Lazarus is the reason the authorities move against Jesus – this *seventh sign*.

### **From the Text**

Imagine the whole range of human experience, from ecstasy to tragedy. The Resurrection Zone has everything in that range and beyond what we can imagine. The joy of life regained, the grief of Jesus' life so senselessly lost, it seemed. Exaltation and humiliation. Life and death.

In a sense, Holy week is everything in life. Nothing is outside of its canopy. And this is what life is really like. All of these experiences. And somehow this is a comfort to us in our ordinary lives.

If you are thinking about the raising of Lazarus in terms of the resuscitation of a corpse, we are missing the meaning of the text completely. It isn't about the mechanics, the physiology of *bodily* resurrection.

Paul says ***But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" ...it is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.*** (1 Cor 15:35-44).

This isn't about redivivus corpses.

Here is what it *is* about. Lazarus, about whom we know nothing really, returned to life as the first-born from the dead for all ordinary people. He is the Adam of the new creation; he is the first man of the dawning of the new Kingdom of God. Like Adam (which means earth), Lazarus rises from the dust. Death cannot contain him here in the Resurrection Zone.

The power of the Creator God unimaginably displayed!

He is the firstborn of the new Community of God. He is Saint Everyman and Woman and Child.

"He represents the disciple of Jesus who has died, and who will be raised because Jesus has been glorified."<sup>iv</sup>

Do you know who the second person to enter the Kingdom of God in the Resurrection Zone? The thief on the cross who says, ***"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,"*** ***And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*** (Luke 23: 42-43)

Here in the Resurrection Zone, we see the world to come. We see our future in Christ. It is a future so potent in hope that:

- Dead bodies spring to life
- Torture cannot suppress truth
- Killing does not extinguish the light
- Tragedy gives way to life
- Loss can turn to hope
- Sacrificial love conquers *everything!*

The raising of Lazarus shows us that the resurrection of the Son of God spills out to the ordinary human bodies that we all possess. Lazarus was and is every man, woman and child in the kingdom of God, past present and future.

The question before us all today, here on the cusp of Holy Week, is 'Do you want some of this?'

Do you? Because if you do, let me assure you, you're okay. You're not too far gone. God has made provision for you and me, and for all under this canopy.

One of my favourite songs is People Get Ready (written by Curtis Mayfield and performed by the Impressions, 1965).

*People get ready*

*There's a train a-coming*

*You don't need no baggage*

*You just get on board*

*All you need is faith*

*To hear the diesels humming*

*You don't need no ticket*

*You just thank the Lord*

This isn't a belief test. This isn't about whether the modern believer (or skeptic) can suspend their disbelief long enough to accept that a dead man comes back to life. It's not about how strong your faith is or if you can believe xyz.

This is not about if we can have enough *faith in Christ*, but if we can open our hearts to the *faithfulness of Christ*.

For we are all Lazarus, in a way; people that know the power of the Kingdom will raise us to glory someday, just like that repentant thief and that terribly normal friend of Jesus.

Amen

Benediction:

And now, may you, like Lazarus, have the joy of life regained, like the thief, the blessing of forgiveness, and may your tragedy and loss be transformed by the redemptive power of God.

In the name of the father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

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- <sup>i</sup> I am the bread of life (6:35)
  - I am the light of the world (8:12)
  - I am the gate for the sheep (10:7)
  - I am the good shepherd (10:11)
  - I am the resurrection and the life (11:25)
  - I am the way and the truth and the life (14:6)
  - I am the true vine (15:1)

<sup>ii</sup> John 12:7-8, 13:33, 14:25-29. In the synoptics Matt 16:21-23 and parallels in Mark and Luke. See also Mt 20:17-19; Mark 9:22, 30-32, 8:31-32, 1-:32-34; Luke 9:43-45, 21-22, 18:31-34.

<sup>iii</sup> The only other mention of the name Lazarus is an unrelated fellow in a parable of Jesus, poor Lazarus who reclines in the bos om of Abraham in Jesus' parable in Luke 16.

<sup>iv</sup> *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol IV, 266.