

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**  
**FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT**  
**REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON**  
**“CHANGED LIVES - LAZARUS”**  
**John 11:1-45**  
**March 9, 2008**  
**8:45 AM Service**

Martha personifies faith at its weakest and at its strongest. She chides Jesus for not coming when he was called, yet she firmly believes that Jesus can restore her brother to life. Sometimes our ambivalent faith is strongest when we need it most.

A part of living is coming to terms with death. The fear of death can keep us from embracing life. But death does not come only at the end of life; it comes to us repeatedly in the midst of living. Faith relates to our **“little deaths”** as well as our final demise. In Christ we find death being transformed into life over and over again.

Death is a part of life. We may not like to think about death, but it remains a constant, ever-present reality in our lives. We see in the cycles of nature that death is essential to life. Living organisms die as a way of providing the seeds of new life. In the organs of our bodies old cells are constantly dying so that new cells may be born. As difficult as it is to believe when we are young and healthy, even our own dying may turn out to be a blessing. A pastoral psychologist says, **“Death often comes as a friend when it is time to die.”** Yet, even as we live, our lives are filled with dead places, places that challenge and frustrate us, places that defy all our efforts to preserve and promote life.

A stranger is at work in the church sanctuary. A member of the congregation happens along and asks the worker what he is doing. He replies, **“I’m here to try and fix the dead places.”** Fix the dead places? What do you suppose he does? He is an acoustical engineer and he is attempting to improve the sound quality in certain **“dead”** areas of the sanctuary. Perhaps you have had dead places in your lawn. Though **“dead,”** these areas may expand and threaten the rest of the grass. Perhaps

you have had dead places in your schedule, those times between appointments or classes, which you may choose to use creatively and productively - - or not! Dead places are a fact of life.

Some dead places are more serious, however. They threaten the quality of our lives, or our sense of life's meaning, or our self-confidence, or our faith. Dead places can develop in relationships, causing us to question the very nature and future of a marriage, a friendship, or a partnership. Dead places may develop psychologically or emotionally. Depression, fear, grief, and guilt can be so powerful that we feel utterly lifeless at the center of our being. Dead places can certainly occur spiritually. Emptiness creates a void where our faith has always been. Coldness in the heart seems to relegate God to edges of the universe. Doubt chokes out our inner sources of strength. Dead places in our lives can be more threatening than death itself.

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived in Bethany, a village just outside of Jerusalem. These siblings were some of Jesus' closest friends. Their home was one of Jesus' favorite places. Lazarus became ill. Jesus had retreated across the Jordan River to find a safe place from his enemies. When he received the news of Lazarus' illness, Jesus remained where he was for two more days. When he finally arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had died and had been in the tomb for four days.

***Standing before the tomb, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"*** And the dead man came out of the tomb, still wrapped in his burial clothes, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, ***"Take off the grave clothes and let him go."***

What an amazing story. After four days in the tomb, Jesus raised a dead man from the grave. What a changed life! But what is important here for us to understand is that this is your story and mine. We are not one of the bystanders. We are not Mary and Martha. We are Lazarus, and we are called to new life. ***"Lazarus, come out!"*** The important lesson here is that we can all have a changed life.

**This is a story that affirms the idea of resurrection.** The dead in Christ will arise. We will live beyond the grave with Christ and with those we have loved. We will overcome the dead places in our lives.

Where are your dead places? Where in your life, or in your heart, has life been lost? Is your faith, your hope, your love buried in some tomb? The great Tolstoy, in mid-life, lost his spiritual moorings. **“I felt the ground on which I stood was crumbling, that there was nothing for me to stand on, that what I had been living for was nothing, that I had no reason for living. . . Life was meaningless.”** Faced with a purposeless existence, the only rational choice was suicide, yet Tolstoy could not take that way out. Instead, in observing the simple faith of the Russian peasants, he came to believe that *faith* **“stores the deepest human wisdom,”** that *faith alone* makes it possible to live. (Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession*, 1882) Generations of readers have been inspired by Tolstoy’s spiritual awakening, in which he was called from death to life.

When Jesus finally arrived in Bethany, Martha gently chided him. **“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”** Jesus said, **“Your brother will rise again.”** Martha replied, **“I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”** But Jesus made resurrection a *present-tense* reality by calling Lazarus out of his tomb. Phillips Brooks said, **“The great Easter truth is not that we are to live newly after death - - that is not the great thing - - but that we are to be new here and now by the power of the resurrection.”** Resurrection is not **“everlasting life,”** that is, an endless *quantity* of life. Resurrection is a *quality* of life that begins in the present.

Think of the dead places in your past. Dark days of suffering. A menacing difficulty without a solution. A loss that tore your heart out. Some wilderness wandering you thought would never end. The terrain of life is full of dead places. Those of us who have lived long enough must agree that we have lived through many deaths. By what power, then, are we still here? How have we survived so much dying? And beyond mere surviving, how is it that we have actually grown through these experiences? It is the power of the One who transforms death into life. Jesus comes to your Bethany and mine, where we are anxious or depressed in the face of death. He comes as **“the resurrection and the life.”** Trust him. He wants to call forth life from our dead places. **“Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”**

**The story of Lazarus can be our story.** We, too, can be turned loose,

untied. Whether you are addicted to a chemical substance or to unsavory habits, this is good news. ***“Lazarus, come out!”*** This is good news for anyone who has lived an empty, meaningless life, ***“Lazarus, come out!”*** This is good news if you are hurting, tired, and at your wit’s end. ***“Lazarus, come out!”*** This is good news for all of us, ***“Lazarus, come out!”*** This is a word of encouragement for anyone who needs to make a new beginning in life.

That’s what Christ does for us. He gives us the power to start again, to live again. The power of God was at work in Jesus. I invite you to let God work in all your experiences of death, to bring life out of them. I would love it, if you would invite me to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.