

APRIL 1, 2017 BUCYRUS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“JESUS CHANGES EVERYTHING: REALLY LIVE”

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Scripture: John 11:1-7, 17-44

Several years ago there was a headline in a Toronto Newspaper which read: "Dead Man Walks into His Own Funeral." Apparently, Dan Squires had walked off his job as a welder without telling anyone where he was going. He had been missing for several days when his brother had mistakenly identified a badly mangled corpse, which had been hit by a train, as Mr. Squires.

The story reads: "Mr. Squires, age 49 had shocked his sister out of her skin Thursday morning when he came shuffling up her street in east end Toronto, while the rest of the family were paying their respects to the man they thought was Mr. Squires laid out in a nearby funeral home. His sister had been too upset to attend.

'I sat there on the steps screaming,' said his sister. He asked, 'Why are you so upset?' His sister replied, 'Everyone's at your funeral.'" When Squires showed up at his funeral, the first thing he did was go into the reception area which was filled with food and drink...and so...he popped open a beer and then walked into the chapel where the memorial service was taking place.

A man from the funeral home asked, "Who are you?" Mr. Squires replied: "I'm the guy you got laid out there."

The story ends with: "Mr. Squires said that he now faces the task of re-applying for a disability pension that had been cut off after he was pronounced dead."

Have you ever known anyone who after having been basically written off as dead--through a miracle of God, and the help of others--was able to walk out of their tomb just as alive as anyone else?

How about persons, who, have been in a terrible car accident? The family gathers at the hospital. The doctor comes out and informs the person's loved ones that "it doesn't look like he will survive." At that moment the mourning begins. But prayers of hope go up as well. Still, people call on Jesus to perform a miracle. The doctors and nurses work hard to save the life of the badly injured person. After a long operation, the person stays in ICU for several weeks...and eventually is transported from the hospital to a rehabilitation facility, where, with the help of physical and occupational therapists the man who had once been written off as dead, is brought back to full health and life. Eventually he rejoins the community, and is so thankful for his new lease on life that he truly feels more alive than he ever did before.

Or how about folks who go to the doctor and hear the dreaded "C" word? We have a number of you who have been through this, yourselves, here today. Your church family, your friends and

others take to praying for you daily. Medical professionals do their best to get rid of the dreaded disease. Loved ones visit you, encourage you, help you. And one day, you are able to walk out of the doctor's office having been declared--"cancer free."

Or what about the man or woman who has struggled with addiction to drugs and alcohol? One day he or she cries out to Jesus: "Lord set me free from this dreaded disease!!!" And so the person finally is given the strength to enter a drug rehab facility. He or she becomes "clean" for the first time in many years. When they "get out" they are able to stay sober with the help of continued prayer, a new church family, and regular participation in Alcoholics Anonymous or Celebrate Recovery.

In our Gospel Lesson for this morning, Jesus has been called to the side of a dear friend who is sick. By the time he arrives on the scene, the man--Lazarus--has already died. And the first thing that Martha, one of Lazarus' sisters says to Jesus is: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." And then she adds a note of faith and hope: "Even now I know that whatever you ask, God will give you." "Jesus told her, 'Your brother will rise again.'"

When Martha's sister Mary finally speaks to Jesus, she says the same thing as her sister: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." When Jesus arrives at Lazarus' tomb He sees that a stone is covering the entrance. And then He says some astonishing words: "Remove the stone." Martha is repulsed: "Lord the smell will be awful! He's been dead four days."

I mean, what is going on here? Does Jesus want to exhume the body or perform an autopsy like a coroner? What good can come from that? You know, in a lot of ways, Lazarus represents all of us, does he not? We are entombed in a culture of death. Many of us go through our days and years with little joy, little life, little hope. Perhaps a number of us even attend church. We might come every Sunday or nearly every Sunday--for an hour. We mouth the words to the songs. During the sermon we might half listen and half day dream. During the announcements we hear about the weekly Bible study. We see that the Bucyrus Neighborhood Churches are inviting all who will to come and help with Vacation Bible School. But we don't even entertain the idea of getting involved in all this.

We might often feel lonely and isolated, but we don't take the initiative to be part of a small group, or a Sunday school class. Perhaps we think, "Well, there isn't a class for folks in my age range. Or there isn't a class with people in it I can relate to." There are a lot of other people thinking this way as well. Why not start one? Why not invite your friends and other church members who might fit into the categories mentioned? If you play an instrument...or if you could enhance our worship experience with your gifts and talents, why not speak up and then step up?

Earlier in our passage for this morning, after Martha said to Jesus: "Lord if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died. Even now I know that whatever you ask God will give you..." Jesus said to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even

though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" And Martha says, "Yes, Lord, I believe..."

And now her declaration of faith is being put to the test. Outside of her brother's tomb Jesus commands her: "Remove the stone." And after she comes up with a pretty good explanation as to why she'd rather not do that...Jesus says to her: "Didn't I tell you that if you believe you will see God's glory? Roll back the stone from where humanity lies dead," Jesus commands.

I urge us all to hear this command this morning as never before and begin to obey. This command sums up God's desire for you, for me, for our church, for the entire world. We are supposed to live life to the full and help others do the same. When we learn not to resist God, and to do what God wants we find ourselves raised to new life. We find ourselves walking out of our own tombs.

God offers us new life: "Remove the stone." Remove the stone that keeps you under the thumb of death. Remove the stone that imprisons you--that paralyzes you. Stop treading water. Stop "going through the motions" of life and start to really live!!!

How many of us find ourselves resisting God's command? How many of us are too afraid of change to "Remove the stone"? How many of us have become comfortable in death? Have we deluded ourselves that "just getting by" is happiness...is Christianity...is how the church is supposed to be or operate? Are we afraid of what might happen if this entire neighborhood, this entire town came alive as a result of us removing the stone?

Let's not squander the promise of God, that if we confront death we will be given new life--a resurrection within ourselves, our families, our friends, our church, our community!!!! When we finally remove the stone we will come to realize just how stuck in the stench of despair we were. Only then will we understand that what we had thought of as happiness and peace was just a phony shame!!!

Martha protests: "Don't make us do that Jesus!!!" But Jesus continues: "Didn't I tell you that if you believe you will see God's glory?" And so they took the stone away.

After a prayer, we are told that Jesus "shouted with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'" And, "The dead man came out, his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth."

And this marked the first day of the rest of Lazarus' life...as it too, can mark the first day of the rest of our lives as well. You and I are Lazarus. And Jesus is calling our names. Take His words to heart. Listen really hard. And find the strength to arise from whatever kills your spirit and destroys you as a person. Then, come to Jesus and help others join the Resurrection movement.

I suggest we say the words out loud during our meditation time, during the day, when we wake up and before we go to sleep: "Lazarus, come out!"

In our Gospel Lesson, Lazarus appears, but he's still bound in his burial clothes. He can't hear, speak, see, walk or reach out--each of these things are a necessary function of being a disciple of Jesus. He can't speak the Word of God. He can't see the face of Christ in others, and reach out in loving service. He remains trapped.

And so Jesus gives a third command: "Untie him and let him go." They must, in brief, embrace him, offer him compassion, and welcome him back. If they really mourned his death, they would rejoice in doing this. This is the work at hand. Everyone is called to join in.

How might we do this? Jesus commands us to spend our lives unbinding others who are bound by our culture of death. For the rest of our lives we are called to help liberate others, setting them free from obedience to their addictions, their anger, their envy, their violence, their loneliness, their isolation, their poverty, their darkness. We are called to release everyone so that they can live freely as disciples of Christ--as lovers of God and neighbor.

What a way to really, really live. What a calling. What a command. What a life. What a future. Praise God! Amen.