

“Do You Believe This?”
John 11:38-44; Ezekiel 37:1-14

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound;
That saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.

It is likely America’s best known hymn, recorded by numerous artists in various musical genres, and sung so beautifully by our own Emily Swezey this morning. Jonathan Aitken, a biographer of the hymn’s author, estimates that it is performed ten million times annually. Yet, this hymn of redemption and comfort grew out of pain, sorrow, and repentance. John Newton, the hymn’s author, at one time captained slave ship.

But life did not begin for Newton in such dastardly circumstances. His devout mother wished him to be a minister. But she died of tuberculosis when Newton was only six years old. A distant stepmother combined with an abusive boarding school education ended with him apprenticing on his father’s ship at age eleven. But, his rebellion against authority caused him to be pressed into the service of the British Royal Navy. After other authoritarian mishaps, he finally got himself traded to a slave ship and began a career in the slave trade.

Known as the most profane sailor on the vessel, Newton evidenced a complete disregard for God, until he began to read a Christian pamphlet. A furious storm, sweeping a fellow sailor overboard from a place on the deck Newton had just left, caused him to rethink his relationship with God.

His conversion was not immediate. He went on to captain a slave ship. But giving up the sea, he began to study Latin, Greek, and theology. He eventually became an Anglican minister in the small English town of Olney. Joining with William Cowper, another recent convert who had also survived a long spiritual journey, they started writing verses and hymns for a newly created prayer group.

Reflecting on his struggle to open himself to God, Newton composed the simple, yet so honest and descriptive words that continue to strike the heart of every one of us, because they so vividly depict both the sorrow of our lives and the joy of our faith in this life and the world to come.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

Our scripture this morning also speaks to the joy and power of the faith in both this life and the world to come. Jesus receives word from his friends Mary and Martha that their brother, Lazarus, whom they describe as “he whom you love” is ill and ask Jesus to come immediately. But Jesus, undoubtedly surprising

his disciples interprets the information as a reason to stay where he is two extra days, explaining that Lazarus' illness will be used to show God's glory.

After these two days, Jesus says to his followers, "Let's go to Bethany," Mary, Martha and Lazarus' home two miles from Jerusalem. The disciples strongly caution against this, noting that the religious authorities were seeking to kill him and journeying near the state and religious capital would be walking straight into a trap. But Jesus is determined to go and Thomas says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Well, when Jesus reaches Bethany, Lazarus has already died and been placed in a tomb for four days. Going out to greet Jesus, Martha says to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Whether this is a statement of faith or reproach, we don't know. But Jesus informs her that her brother will rise again. And when she replies that she knows he will rise again in the last day's resurrection, Jesus tells her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" he asks Martha.

"Yes, Lord, I believe you are the Messiah," states Martha.

Then Mary comes out and replicates her sister's greeting, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

They go to the tomb, where Jesus weeps. But, then, Jesus orders them to roll away the stone from the entrance to the tomb. Martha protests saying, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus tells her if she believes she will see the glory of God.

When the stone is rolled away he yells, "Lazarus, come out!" And the bandaged Lazarus walks out of the tomb.

The scriptures tells us that many of those present believed in Jesus after seeing this miracle. But others reported the incident to the religious authorities who determined that Jesus was such a spiritual and political threat that he must be put to death. So, they began looking for him in order to arrest him.

While sport fishing off the Florida coast, a tourist capsized his boat. He could swim, but his fear of alligators kept him clinging to the overturned craft. Spotting an old beachcomber on the shore, the tourist shouted, "Are there any gators around here?"

"Naw," the man hollered back. "They ain't been around for years!"

Feeling safe, the tourist started swimming leisurely toward the shore. About halfway there, he asked, "How'd you get rid of the gators?"

"We didn't do nothin'," the beachcomber said, "The sharks got 'em."

By heading to Bethany and raising Lazarus, Jesus knew he would be swimming among sharks.

After waiting two days upon learning of Lazarus' illness, Jesus says to his disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." "The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, [the

religious authorities] were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?’”

I seldom watch college football, but my son is a Clemson man, and we do have one or two Clemson people here in the church, so every now and then I would watch part of a Clemson game. And, as most of you know, Clemson’s C.J. Spiller is an exceptional football player. Commentators note his speed, quickness, ability to hit a hole and run to open field. And all of these are true. But what I admired about this kid was his toughness. Beat up, injured, exhausted, he still played. If his team needed him, he put on his helmet, lined up, and gave his all.

Now, when we think about Jesus, words such as gentle, kind, loving, and forgiving quickly come to mind. But this passage reminds us that toughness should also be acknowledged as one of Jesus’ primary attributes. The raising of Lazarus from the dead is Jesus’ greatest miracle. But in this gospel, it is also the catalyst for the religious authorities to arrest and kill Jesus. And Jesus knew this. Our scripture makes it clear that Jesus understood the ramifications of journeying to Bethany. Located only two miles from Jerusalem, the religious center of Israel, to go resurrect Lazarus meant walking straight into the hands of those who were determined to end his ministry and his life. And yet, he goes.

This passage reminds us of Jesus’ toughness, his strength, resiliency, his courage. He knew what going to Bethany meant. The miracle would produce two opposite reactions. Some, on seeing Lazarus walk out of that tomb would believe in Jesus. Others would determine that a man that powerful was too dangerous to live.

Each one of us must decide how we will react to Jesus. Does Jesus’ life, the gospel, faith cause us to believe and follow him? Or, does his divinity intrude into our existences, make demands that scare us and cause us to destroy his influence in our lives?

Note that no one there that day or afterwards disputes the miracle, all the observers believe it happened. The difference is how each allows that belief to influence their thinking and actions. And the influence will cause some to flee or ignore Christ because Jesus calls us to places where there is danger. Doing good, as Jesus did for Lazarus, can foster anger and hatred. Though on the surface it strikes us as counterintuitive, many people fear honesty, forgiveness, aid to others because they believe it harms them.

Jesus went to a place and performed an act that he knew would create faith in some and fear and anger in others. But he went because it was the right thing to do, God’s will. And He calls us to possess the same toughness, the same faith, the same courage.

In their book, The Ascent of a Leader (1999), Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol and Ken McElrath tell of a woman who has a dream in which she wanders into a shop at the mall and finds Jesus behind a counter. Jesus says, “You can have anything your heart desires.”

Astounded, but pleased, the woman asks for peace, joy, happiness, wisdom and freedom from fear. Then she adds, “Not just for me, but for the whole earth.”

Jesus smiles and says, “I think you misunderstood me. We don’t sell fruits, only seeds.”

It is not easy to grow faith in our lives. Turning spiritual seeds into fruits requires belief, toughness, and courage.

“I am the resurrection and the life.”

This is the central statement of this passage and the entire Gospel According to John. This sentence encapsulates John’s purpose in writing. In Jesus, we see God. And, in Jesus, we see the possibilities for our own lives. Jesus’ power over sin and death gives us power over sin and death. The raising of Lazarus confirms Jesus’ identity. We vividly witness God’s ultimate victory over death.

At every funeral, we quote these powerful and comforting words: “I am the resurrection and the life.” They enunciate that core Christian belief that Almighty God does not abandon us, that death is only a gateway into a new existence in the presence of God.

But it is equally true and important to see that this sentence looks not only to the future, but also the present. “I am the resurrection and the life.” Resurrection after death. But life, here and now.

Tradition tells us that Lazarus lived another thirty years after Jesus raised him from the dead. This story is not just about how we will die, but how we will live. Jesus’ question to Martha is his question to you and me: “Do you believe this? Do you believe I can change your life, right here, right now?” Do you and I believe Jesus can defeat the sin within us and turn us in another direction? Martha told Jesus she believed in the final resurrection. Jesus replied by wanting to know if she believed he could give a person new life today, here, now.

This morning, what do you believe?

Some years ago, on a hot summer day in South Florida, a little boy decided to go to the old swimming hole behind his house. In a hurry to dive into the cool water, he ran out the back door, leaving behind shoes, socks and shirt as he went. He flew into the water, not realizing that as he swam toward the middle of the lake, an alligator was swimming toward the shore. The boy’s father, working in the yard, saw the two get closer and closer together. In utter fear, he ran toward the water, yelling to his son as loudly as he could.

Hearing his dad’s voice, the little boy became alarmed and made a U-turn to swim to his father. It was too late. Just as he reached his father, the alligator reached him. From the dock, the father grabbed his little boy by the arms just as the alligator snatched his legs. That began an incredible tug-of-war between the two. The alligator was much stronger than the father, but the father was much too passionate to get go.

A farmer happened to drive by, heard screams, raced from his truck, took aim and shot the alligator.

Remarkably, after weeks in the hospital, the little boy survived. His legs were extremely scarred by the vicious attack. And on his arms were deep scratches where his father's fingernails dug into his flesh in an effort to hang on to the son he loved.

A newspaper reporter who interviewed the boy after the trauma asked if he would show him his scars. The boy lifted his pant legs. And then, with obvious pride, he said to the reporter, "But look at my arms. I have great scars on my arms, too. I have them because my dad wouldn't let go."

Do you believe Jesus won't let go of you, either in this life or the world to come?

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Then when we'd first begun.

The hymn speaks both to the present and the future. So does the raising of Lazarus. The question of faith, of belief, is not about rules and regulations, but what we believe about Jesus, his relationship to God and his ability to save and change you and me.

This morning, Jesus asks, "Do you believe this?"

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