

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	22 March 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Fifth Sunday of Lent
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Dr Earl Collins, Chancellor

Of all the stories in the gospels about Jesus' miracles, none is as remarkable as the raising of his friend Lazarus from the dead. Here especially, in this cathedral, we are particularly fortunate in having in our south aisle two magnificent medieval sculptures, which illustrate and comment on the account we have just heard.

It is a story full of drama, but inevitably the question must arise about its truth. Did Jesus really bring back someone who had died and been placed in a tomb for three days? It sounds incredible because in our experience people do not come back from the dead. Can we really be asked to believe that?! Let me therefore say right away that I do believe it, and I think there is a good reason to do so. Notwithstanding its strangeness and difficulty, given the truth of who Jesus is and what he came to do, it makes perfect sense.

Of course, if one doesn't believe in God anyway, and therefore thinks that miracles are impossible, no difficulty will arise. By that kind of reckoning it simply can't have happened. It would be no more credible than a fairy tale – though we might perhaps reflect that fairy tales in their own way can also convey truth.

But this isn't a fairy tale. This is claiming that something happened to a real person called Lazarus, in a real village called Bethany. That place is still there today just over the hill from Jerusalem, but as a city with an Arab name, Al-Azariya which means, 'The place of Lazarus.' In the Middle East, as in Ireland, people have long memories. We

know from the Gospels that Jesus used to visit his friends at Bethany, Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. They were real people, not figures in a myth. The issue of its truth hangs on who Jesus was recognised to be and what he came to do.

First then, let us consider who he was. The Gospel according to John shows that those who experienced Jesus saw that he was infinitely more than just another prophet or holy man. St John describes him as the Word of God through whom God spoke all things into being. The Hebrew prophets knew that God's Word, unlike ours, is not just a passing thing but must be as eternal and all-powerful as God himself. St John however declared something unprecedented and astounding: the eternal Word of God became flesh and lived amongst us.

'Flesh' in the Bible means the opposite of God, everything created, fragile, and ultimately destined for death. St Augustine once wrote that while many philosophers held exalted ideas about God's eternal Word, they did not assert that the Word had become flesh. Yet the Gospel according to John asserts precisely that.

Only after Jesus' death and resurrection did the disciples grasp that this wandering carpenter from Nazareth who died as a convicted criminal preaching blasphemy, was no less than God-incarnate, God's Word-made-flesh. The Church calls that 'the mystery of the incarnation.'

It is a mystery that should force us to our knees in adoration and love; and once it has been recognised in faith, it opens a door to understanding. Since Jesus is God incarnate there is nothing incredible about him calling a dead man back to life. Because through Christ all things were made – as we will soon sing in the Creed - through him all things in our broken world may also be re-made. That is why he is called 'Jesus' – because he is the Saviour of the world.

We must therefore also consider what he came to do. Our situation was dire. An ancient hymn described it well: 'God in pity saw us fallen, shamed and sunk in misery.' Our need called out the infinite mercy of God. Our Jewish forebears knew that God was merciful. In the Psalms we too sing that God stooped from the heights to look down, to lift up the poor from the dust of death. But Christians believe that in Jesus, God didn't just look down from afar. Rather, he embraced our dust, took us to himself, became one with us.

All Jesus' miracles - or signs as they are called in John's Gospel - reveal that God wants to deliver us from death. Jesus was doing that throughout his ministry, but it was especially what he was doing in Bethany, at the tomb of his dead friend Lazarus.

However, we must note that a vast difference between Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life and the resurrection of Jesus himself. It is really important to recognise that difference otherwise we may fail to understand what our Christian faith says about Christ's unique resurrection.

In raising Lazarus, Jesus spoke his creative word into the darkness of the tomb - 'Lazarus, come out! - and overcame death and decay. By the same power with which he had created the world, Jesus re-created it and restored the dead man to ordinary life.

But that word 'ordinary' is of the utmost importance. Yes, Jesus restored him to life - but it was ordinary life in his village at Bethany. Indeed, we read later that the Chief Priests and Pharisees found Lazarus such an embarrassment that they plotted to kill him. Lazarus had been returned to everyday life, but we would die again later.

The resurrection of Jesus, which we will celebrate at Easter, is of an entirely different order. After Jesus' death and burial, God raised him up, but not so that he could return, like Lazarus, to ordinary life. The Easter witnesses spoke of him having been exalted, lifted to a new form of life, resurrection-life. The raising of Christ by the Father was

more than the resuscitation of his crucified corpse; it was his transformation by the Holy Spirit.

The witnesses attest that Jesus was truly raised. It was the same body that had been placed in the tomb: the marks of his wounds demonstrate that. The tomb was indeed empty because he was risen. But his body, wracked and torn by nails and lance was transfigured - transformed by God's glory. We know that from his ability to come and go, to appear and disappear during those forty days before his final return to the Father at the Ascension.

As St Paul put it, in words we read every year at the Easter Vigil, Christ having been raised from the dead dies no more – death has no more power over him. His resurrection was the revelation of new, indestructible life, life with God. The raising of Lazarus by Jesus was a step on the way to Easter – but only that. It was not yet Easter itself.

I mentioned at the start the two splendid medieval sculptures in the south aisle. Do please go and look at them when you can. But do not stop there, because that is not the end. Instead keep going along the south aisle until you come to the chapel of St Mary Magdalen. There you will see Graham Sutherland's painting of her meeting Jesus on Easter Sunday morning, after his resurrection.

That is the goal toward which we are heading. We are heading that way throughout Lent - indeed we are heading that way throughout life. Today's story of Lazarus being brought back to life, marvellous as it is, is but a signpost on the way. It points beyond itself, to the one and only source of indestructible life, Jesus Christ our risen Saviour who destroyed death by his death and now lives in glory. He calls us to follow him along that path.