

Believe

John 11:1-44

April 2, 2017

First United Methodist Church, Lindstrom

(This is a manuscript prepared for sermon delivery and may not represent actual words spoken.)

“...and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

The Gospel of John reports some pretty incredible encounters people had with Jesus. There was Nicodemus and Jesus. That was followed by the woman at the well and Jesus. Then came the blind man and Jesus. Today we read about a dead man, Lazarus, and Jesus. His sisters also encountered Jesus.

This is a story we know fairly well. Just a brief synopsis. It seems Jesus was especially close to Lazarus and Mary and Martha. He spent time with them in their home in Bethany. They were friends.

Lazarus got sick. Word of this reached Jesus. Jesus had delivered many infirmed folks from what infirmed them. But he did not exactly rush to the side of his ailing friend. So the sickness got the better of Lazarus. He died. It was then when Jesus decided to set out for Bethany. The disciples were hesitant. There had been threats on Jesus' life. They went with Jesus thinking they might be dying with him.

They arrived in Bethany. Jesus had discussions with Mary and Martha. They both figured if Jesus had been there, their brother might not have died. Jesus assured them that he was, and is, the resurrection and the life. Those who put their faith in him will live forever. We'll come back to this.

They went to the tomb. Jesus asked that the stone be rolled away. Martha mentioned the possibility of an odor. Lazarus had been dead four days. This is significant. You see, in Jewish thought, it was believed that a person's spirit might actually, oh, I don't know—hang around the body for as long as three days. Life could return in that time. But after four days,

the person was—in fact—dead. Lazarus was not merely dead; he was really most sincerely dead.

The stone was removed. Then Lazarus had his encounter with Jesus. Jesus prayed and then shouted, “Lazarus, come out!” He literally was saying, “Lazarus, this is the way out!” Lazarus...on his way to heaven. Lazarus...on his way to paradise. Lazarus...on his way to glory. Lazarus heard a word from Jesus. And that word was something like, “Ah, Lazarus...I need you to come on back and spend a little more time in this world.” I always imagined what I might have thought and said if I had been Lazarus. But I won't go there now.

So Lazarus came out. What a sight. He was all wrapped up in grave clothes. He would not have been able to see very well. There was a cloth around his face. He had to feel his way out of the tomb. Jesus then told the people to take the grave clothes off Lazarus and let him go.

A couple of quick observations here. First, when they took the grave clothes off Lazarus, the clothes most likely would have ended up in a heap on the ground. Later, when Peter and John reached the tomb of Jesus, they noticed Jesus' grave clothes not in a heap on the ground. They were still neatly lying there...as if Jesus just rose up out of them. This sight led them to believe. Second, Jesus involved the people in the freeing of Lazarus. Jesus uses us to set people free.

But I want to return to the conversation Jesus had with Mary and Martha. Both Mary and Martha told Jesus that they knew if Jesus had been there earlier, their brother would not have died. It was to Martha that Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who