Sermon Sunday March 26th at Stowe

Psalm 130; John 11: 1-45 (Lazarus)

You may know the story of the man who died twice – no, not the book by Richard Osman, but the story of Lazarus in the NT.

Let’s look at this story as if it were chapters in a book.

In chapter one we have Jesus and the disciples in Galilee, when an email – sorry, a message – comes from Mary and Martha who live in Bethany. Bethany, by the way, had become a haven for Jesus, somewhere he could escape to and rest, since he had no home of his own. His good friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived there. Of the three siblings, we know least about Lazarus. He never actually speaks. In fact, we don’t even know if they all lived in the same house – probably not, since in a later chapter when Mary and Martha throw a party in Jesus’ honour, Mary and Martha are serving and Lazarus is reclining at table – so he was obviously a guest. Anyway, that’s a bit of an aside.

The sisters’ message explains that Lazarus is very ill. They didn’t add ‘please can you come’ but it kind of implied that – they was hoping and expecting he would take the hint and set off to Bethany straight away. It’s what you’d do if you discover your best friend was seriously ill.

Jesus had other ideas. We’re not completely sure why he didn’t head off for Bethany immediately. But if we’ve learned anything from reading the NT, I hope we have gathered that Jesus does what Jesus does in his own time, in his own way, unaffected by the views of others. Apart from his Father, of course.

And Jesus decided he would stay in Galilee for a few more days. This is a bit of a puzzle for us. Many explanations have been put forward as to why he didn’t go straight away; it may be that, as he knew he was going to raise Lazarus from death, he wanted to show God’s power in raising a body which had been dead for some time. This is the only incident of those in which Jesus brought people back to life in which the person had been dead for several days.

What Jesus said to the disciples was: ‘Lazarus is asleep and I’m going there to wake him up.’ Have you noticed how, time and again, Jesus draws others into conversation? He says something with two meanings, and the other person responds at one level, at which Jesus comes back at another level. For instance, when Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, Jesus said ‘You must be born again.’ Nicodemus took this literally and asked how on earth we could climb back into our mother’s womb, to which Jesus responded with: ‘Unless a person is born again (implying, spiritually rather than physically), they cannot enter the Kingdom.’

Again, when Jesus spoke about ‘destoy this temple and I will rebuild it in three days’, he wasn’t speaking literally but of his own body – he would die and he would rise again.

The disciples took from this – ‘Lazarus is asleep and I’m going there to wake him up’ – as good news, for if he was asleep then that would help him get better. So Jesus went on to explain that Lazarus was dead but that all was not lost, because he would go and wake him.

His friends, in any case, tried to dissuade him from going back to the area, near Jerusalem, because that would be so dangerous. The Pharisees and rulers had already tried to kill him, so best stay away. But trying to persuade Jesus to change course was impossible, so after a few days they set off. Thomas, ever the optimist, said in his best Eeyore voice ‘Well, we might as well go along and die with him.’

Chapter two. Not of John’s gospel but of our story of the man who died twice.

They arrive in Bethany. Martha is the first to greet Jesus with: ‘If only you’d been here earlier Lazarus would not have died’. That shows, on one hand, great faith in what Jesus could have done, but implies ‘When you got my message, why didn’t you come at once? Now it’s too late.’ And, as if to correct herself, Martha added ‘Even yet, I believe that God will give you whatever you ask.’

Jesus responded ‘Your brother will rise again’. Here again, Jesus says something which may be taken at two levels. Just as with his conversation with then disciples, so here with Martha – Jesus speaks of Lazarus rising again and Martha immediately thinks of the end of times when the general resurrection will happen. But Jesus means here and now, bringing Lazarus back to this life.

The belief of Jews at the time (and especially throughout the OT) was that all souls will go, after death, to a place called Sheol. Sheol is not the same as Hell, but it literally means a place of shade. The shining exception to this belief in the OT is the life and witness of Job, who says to his so-called friends ‘I know that my Redeemerlives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth.And after my skin has been destroyed, yetin my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes.’

Chapter three. Jesus asks to see the place where the body has been laid to rest. All this has an impact on Jesus’ emotions. He was, after all, fully human as well as fully God. John in his gospel account uses a Greek word for which, as so often, we do not have an English equivalent. The word is embrimathai and is used in v33 ‘Jesus was deeply moved in spirit, and troubled.’ It’s a word used only about four times in NT. One of its meanings then was to describe the snorting of a horse, either in anger or surprise, displaying some sort of deep emotion. Such a deep emotion must have seized Jesus that an involuntary groan was wrung from his heart.

When he saw the cave with a stone in front, he told them to take the stone away. They tried to explain how the body would have started to decompose and the smell would be terrible, but he insisted. As you probably know, in the middle East they bury bodies soon after death because of the heat and the likelihood of the body rotting. I was leading a funeral on Thursday which was, unusually, an open-coffin funeral. My first one. I knew the man a little – his name was Lindy and he was regularly at Community lunch. It was a bit unnerving during the commendation when I usually approach the coffin to lead the prayers. At least Lindy was dressed in a suit and tie, not the middle eastern way.

When they opened up the tomb in Bethany, Jesus prayed out loud to his Father. Now his relationship with God was so close that he didn’t need to speak the prayer out loud, but in this case his prayer was spoken for the benefit of those who were there listening.

Jesus shouted to Lazarus to ‘come out’. Only then did the miracle become apparent to all those there. The body had been there for four days, and their belief was that the spirit of a person after death hovered around, trying to get back into the body; but after four days the spirit gave up and went away because the flesh could have decomposed and be unrecognizable.

Which made the miracle all the greater. The sight of Lazarus struggling to escape from the cave, wrapped in grave clothes - who could ever forget that? No wonder Jesus said . ‘Take off the grave clothes and let him go’.

Just look at that for a minute. ‘Take off the grave clothes and let him go’. Two different things. one physical, so he can move his limbs again, and the other spiritual, as he is free to live again. ‘Let him go’ is better translated ‘set him free’. I think there’s a lesson there in itself, as we compare the rising of Lazarus with a conversion experience. New life means new freedom.

When word got out about what Jesus had done, it spread like wildfire. No wonder so many came to see his triumphal entry into Jerusalem not long after, to cheer him on and shout ‘Hosanna!’

But conversely this incident spurred the Pharisees to take further action and actively seek to have him killed - which they succeeded in doing not many weeks later, by having him crucified. But that’s not the end of that story, as we know.

But that’s where our story of the man who died twice ends. Lazarus would have lived many more years, but would then have died, as everybody will. But before that, he would have such a story to tell. And I’m sure many would have come to faith in Jesus as a result of hearing his testimony.

I wonder, do you have a story to tell? Have you tried to tell it to others? It won’t be as amazing as Lazarus’, obviously, but nevertheless it’s worth sharing. That may be the way in which you came to faith, which may be recent and it may be many years ago. I became a Christian in 1959. But you might also relate how God has dealt with you more recently. For instance, we moved from Leamington to Buckingham in 2015, and I’m sure God was in that – how we looked at (I think) 15 houses locally and didn’t really fall in love with any of them. And then, as we began to question what we were supposed to do now, we went to an agent and found a property not actually quite on the market yet. We went to see it and – well, that’s where we are now living. God moves in mysterious ways. We have told that story to many people as a witness to the God we worship. It’s good to share such events as a witness to our faithful God.

I pray you are able to share your stories of how God has worked in your life, whether amazing like Lazarus or more commonplace like most of us. It will make a difference.