



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 26, 2023

Remembering Who You Are

John 11:17–27, 38–53

¹⁷ Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. ²⁰ So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” ²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴ Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷ She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”

³⁸ Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. ³⁹ Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.” ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³ When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” ⁴⁴ The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, ⁴⁶ but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. ⁴⁷ So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” ⁴⁹ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all. ⁵⁰ Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.” ⁵¹ He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, ⁵² and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. ⁵³ So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.



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What would you say is the hardest part of living the Christian life? Is it giving up a portion of your weekend to be in Church? Is it the feeling that you have to put something in the offering plate? Maybe it's thinking that you'd better watch your language when you hit your thumb with a hammer. Or could it be the feeling that you're missing something by not being able to behave like some of your less "religious" friends?

Or could your uneasiness be caused by something more significant? Might not the hardest part of being a Christian be the realization that you're not really in control of things – the knowledge that you don't really know what's best for your life – the awareness that you don't have all the answers? Isn't the hardest part of being a Christian having to admit that you actually have very few answers?

You see, surrendering ourselves to God is contrary to everything we're told by the world and our own instinct. The world says, "You take charge, you decide, live your way, demand your rights." The world would have you act as if you were the center of everything, that you are at least the center of your own life, as if your self-defined "needs" take priority over everything else. The world would have you demand to be your own god. After all, who knows you better than you do? Who knows better what you need than you do? That's how the world thinks. But the world is wrong. In fact, we see in today's Gospel that the world is wrong on two counts.

Our text begins with an account that you probably know well: the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Obviously, we see here that Jesus has power over life and death. But we also learn in this text that we, by ourselves, have no idea what's best for us. "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." That's the reaction of both Mary and Martha. The implication is: "Jesus, if you had been here Lazarus would be alive and that would have been better for us than his dying." These two fine women thought they knew what would be best for them. But did they?

Compare that to the thinking of Caiaphas, the High Priest. The Council was meeting and they were in a dither. "What are we going to do?" they say. "This man (Jesus) is performing many signs. If we let Him go on like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." What does Caiaphas say in response to this? "It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish." He has it all figured out. He knows how to fix the problem. "You're worried about the Romans? Then remove the problem. Get rid of Jesus and the Romans won't be concerned about us anymore. We'll drop back below their radar." Yes, Caiaphas thinks he knows what's best. But does he?

Both the women and Caiaphas thought they had it all figured out. "If only you had been here" and "If only He weren't here." Obviously, their solutions were 180 degrees apart, but that's beside the point. In their minds the answers were obvious. Just like in your mind the answers are obvious, too.

What do I need? I need to watch out for myself. I need to take care of myself. I



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need to do what I need to do. I need to look out for #1. I don't need someone telling me what to do. I need to keep my options open. After all, I know myself, I know my needs, I know my problems better than anyone else. Better than my parents. Better than my spouse. Better than my kids. Better than my teachers, my employer. Better than anyone. No one's opinion is more valuable to me than my own. I know what's best for me. But do we?

No. Why? Because our attention is completely focused on ourselves. We can't see anything beyond ourselves. We fill the entire screen, so to speak, and because of that we don't know anything. We don't even know ourselves as we should.

And to make matters worse, what we do see is distorted; it's incomplete. We see only what we want to see. We don't see the whole picture. We don't understand our own motives or attitudes. Why? Because our thinking about ourselves is warped, it's inaccurate. As Robert Burns once wrote:

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!

Other people see us better than we see ourselves. Oh, we can easily see their sins, but we're blind to our own; we see their defects, but not our own.

In addition to this, we have absolutely no idea of how we have failed in our relation to God. Our sinful nature doesn't even have a category labeled "proper relationship to God." We've become so immersed in ourselves that it's like no one else even exists – unless they somehow help to promote our agenda. As much as we'd argue against it, the truth is, we all worship idols because we worship ourselves.

But God isn't satisfied with that, which is why He sent His Son into the world. God realized the mess we'd made of things – the mess we'd made of ourselves. So He sent Jesus to redeem us – to remake us, indeed, to recreate us.

It's interesting to note that the raising of Lazarus is the last of seven miracles recorded by John in his gospel. In those signs Jesus shows His absolute power over all things. He has authority over nature. That's indicated by turning water into wine (ch. 3), by feeding the 5000 (ch. 6), and by walking on the Sea of Gennesaret (ch. 6). Jesus has authority over disease, healing the official's son at Capernaum (ch. 4), the sick man at the pool of Bethesda (ch. 5), a blind man in Jerusalem (ch. 9). And now comes the raising of Lazarus (ch. 11). Jesus has authority over death. Everything – the natural world, disease, even death – must bow before the Son of God.

The raising of Lazarus is Jesus' seventh miracle. There will be no more recorded by John. Why? Because no more are needed. Seven is the perfect number. There's nothing that has not been shown to be under the authority of Jesus. He has all power.



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But there is one more miracle recorded by John, isn't there. It's found in chapter 20. But this one is different from all the rest because it doesn't involve any one else, just Jesus. And that remaining miracle is this – that Jesus raises Himself from the dead. Remember His promise? "I lay down My life that I may take it up again." (ch. 10) This we might call the "eighth" miracle of Jesus in John's gospel.

The number eight has significance in Scripture in that it signifies something new. After creating the universe in six days and resting on the seventh, the first day of this new creation was the eighth day. The first day of the week, then, occurs on the eighth day. The Jews were commanded to circumcise their baby boys on the eighth day, signifying a new beginning. This eighth miracle recorded by John – the resurrection of Jesus from the dead – marks something entirely new. New life is being bestowed by God the Father through Christ the Son.

And now we come to you, beloved. Remember the words of St. Paul in Romans 6: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?" That's you. But Paul continues: "Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." You see, having been baptized into Jesus you've been given a new life. You've been given a share in Jesus' glorified, resurrected life. You have in fact died and been raised just as He was. What happened to Lazarus has happened to you. You, too, have been called forth from among the dead. And, as a result, you are no longer the person you once were – the internally focused, barely aware person that you were. You've been made new and have been declared to be a child of God.

So, what's the hardest part about being a Christian? It's not the little details of what you should wear, or how your hair should look, or whether or not you should have a beer. It's remembering who you are. It's rejecting the lies of Satan and remembering the promises of God – living by the promises of God. Does Jesus still exercise power over all things? Absolutely. He still possesses the authority He once showed through His miracles. Jesus has all the answers. Jesus has all the power. Jesus has all the authority over nature, over disease, even over death. And yes, Jesus has the power over sin and its effects. And He exercises His power on behalf of His chosen ones – on behalf of you. He loves you. He forgives you.

Do not allow Satan to deceive you. Don't allow him to lead you back into yourself. Don't allow him to conform you to the world. Instead, live as who you really are. Live as one who's been baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ. Live as a son or daughter of God. A brother or sister of the Lord Jesus. That's who God has made you to be. Live that life all the time. How? By daily confessing your sins, your weaknesses in the face of temptation, your failure to resist Satan. Confess your disobedience toward God. Confess your failure to listen to God. And then, daily, receive from God the free gift of



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forgiveness and life. Continue to put to death the old Adam that clings to you. And continue to do what Holy Scripture encourages you to do – to fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith.

Rejoice, dear family of Christ. You have been bought with a price. Your ransom price was the blood of Jesus. It's a ransom He freely and willingly paid. For you see, you are the beloved of God. You have been forgiven, and set free. Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed He who comes in the name of the Lord. Amen