

June 6, 2010

Houghton Lake United Methodist Church

Jesus Wakes the Dead

John 11:1-44

Pastor Tom Anderson

Congratulations to all of the graduates and their families among us today. We are honored by your presence with us today and the chance to celebrate with all of you this great milestone in your lives. This is a day of new beginnings. That is the meaning of commencement: to begin a task or a journey. May God bless and guide you into the future he has planned for you.

In January of 1989, a Baptist pastor by the name of Don Piper died in a horrible car accident outside of Houston, Texas. EMT's on the scene found him horribly injured without pulse or breath. But ninety minutes later, Reverend Piper miraculously came back to life. He writes of his experience in the best selling book *Ninety Minutes in Heaven* that now has sold over 4 million copies. By all accounts, his story is a miracle on the order of Jesus raising Lazarus after 4 days.

The authenticity of the story in John 11 seems assured by the very telling of it. John details a public event witnessed by the 12 disciples, a delegation of Pharisees from Jerusalem, Martha, Mary and the entire village of Bethany. If the story were not true, given the many witnesses, no one would have dared to preserve it. But as it is, even the enemies of Jesus accepted the truth of this miracle and used it to justify their seeking to kill Jesus before his popularity got out of hand. This is the last and perhaps the greatest of Jesus' miracles during his earthly ministry.

The centerpiece of the account is John 11:25-26 which reads, "Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" What happened in the graveyard is simply the proof of Jesus' statement about who he is and what we are to do with him.

Only God can bring life from the dead. Only God can give and take life from us. Jesus is the God of Life. Years ago, Karen and I were in a Chinese restaurant in Belfast, Northern Ireland. We were a little early for dinner so the place was empty. After we had ordered, the waitress brought out a small cup of hot brown liquid, placed it on the table and left without any instruction. We sat quietly for a moment. Is this the soup? Where are the spoons? Is this the hot tea? Why did she bring only one cup? I reached out and tasted it. Not bad. Maybe it is tea? I'll just wait until she brings the second cup before I drink anymore. Meanwhile another couple sat

down not far from us. The waitress brought them an identical cup and immediately they began using it to wash their hands. It was a finger bowl! I had been drinking from the finger bowl!

Sometimes something can be right before your eyes and you still have no idea what it really is. It's that way with Jesus. Lots of people know the name of Jesus and the fact that Christmas is his birthday and yada, yada, yada, but they still have no idea who he really is. Here's the truth: he is God, the one who creates life and can bring life back from the dead.

The second great truth of this miracle is that Jesus Christ will make a way when there seems to be no way. When you think life has come to a dead end either figuratively or literally, Jesus Christ makes a way forward for you. Mary and Martha thought the end had truly come for Lazarus and there was nothing left to do but grieve.

Clare Patton was a United Methodist Pastor in Michigan years ago. His youngest son died tragically in an accident and left Clare and his wife in profound grief. The District Superintendent presided over the funeral. And after the funeral dinner when all the guests had gone home, the Pattons returned to their empty house and sat in silence feeling the weight of their incomprehensible loss. Louine, his wife, stood up just to stare out the window and to her surprise saw a sight she had never seen before and never saw again. It was not unlike the burning bush that Moses saw in the wilderness. She called her husband to the window, and their in the front yard was a tree filled with tens and tens of thousands of Monarch butterflies. The leaves were completely obliterated by the orange wings. There was not a single butterfly on any other tree except the one on the Patton's lawn. There had been nothing there when they drove into the driveway only a few minutes before, but now suddenly it was like divine fire from heaven. They stood at the window until dark staring in utter astonishment. Their grief had been transformed into hope for they received the sight as an affirmation of everlasting life sent directly from the Lord. Things are never as bad as you think they are, watch for the way God provides!

Finally, with this miracle, Jesus invites us to believe in him. Believe is not a matter of agreeing with a set of facts. The Pharisees agreed with the facts, but they did not believe in Jesus. Christianity is not about having the right opinions and agreeing with the right facts, it is about having personal trust, personal love for and personal obedience to Jesus Christ.

Blondin was the name of a tightrope artist who in the late nineteenth century stretched a rope across Niagara Falls and walked across it before an adoring crowd. When he reached the other side, he spoke to stir up the people. "Do you believe I can walk back across this rope?" "Yes, we

believe!” they shouted. “Do you believe I can walk across while pushing a wheel barrow?” he asked further. “Yes, we believe!” they shouted. “Do you believe I can do it with someone riding in the wheelbarrow?” “Yes, we believe!” they continued eagerly. “Who will get in and ride?” Silence! Then someone emerged from the crowd to get in. It was his mother.

Christianity is not about safety and security. It’s about letting go, trusting and finding yourself in the greatest adventure of life. Faith is surrendering your life into Jesus hands. Faith is not standing on the sidelines; it’s leaving your seat and getting into the game of life in Christ: Believing, loving and obeying. The whole point of this story is not to convince you that it happened. The whole point is to get you to believe in Jesus Christ who made it happen. I leave you with Jesus’ question: Do you believe this?

This morning we celebrate Holy Communion. For Christians, this is a chance for us to answer the question Jesus poses. It is a chance for us to literally get up out of our seats and commit ourselves to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. The bread and cup we share is a statement about taking the life Jesus offers us. We surrender to him. We depend upon him. We will love and serve him always. We will go out into the world to do his will and be his witnesses.