

SERMON BY THE REV. DR. RUSSELL J. LEVENSON, JR.:

# The Hope and Healing Power of Laughter

JOHN 11:1-45

APRIL 10, 2011



I recently read of an interview with a woman who was about to marry for the fourth time at the age of 80. She had outlived her three previous husbands and, in the interview,

the reporter learned that this husband was a funeral director, which prompted the question, "Well, what did your other husbands do for a living?"

"I married the first in my 20s and he was a banker; my next husband in my 30s was

a circus ring leader; in my 50s I married a preacher and now I am marrying a funeral director!" she said. "What a wide variety of jobs. Why do you think you chose men with such different career paths?" the reporter asked. The elderly woman smiled and said, "Well, I suppose I married one for the money, two for the show, three to get ready and four to go!"

How wonderful that this woman could, literally, laugh at something that few of us find amusing — she was able to laugh at death itself. Would it not be good if we could all get to that point? But how?

Today's Gospel offers a powerful opportunity to consider an answer to this question that just might soothe the soul. Part of being able to get our hands

around this story is to own its honesty. We see here some real, tough questions with raw emotion and how the power of God responds to both.

What leads up to this important miracle is a series of honest responses to a situation completely out of human hands. In the passage just before this, Jesus' good friend Mary tracks Jesus down in Bethany and lets Him know that her brother and one of His best friends, Lazarus, is very sick. Jesus tells Mary not to fret, but to hang in there because, "This sickness will not end in death. In fact, let it play out and God's glory will be shown through it." Then, Jesus waits two more days.

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Pictured above: Honorary BUILDING for LIFE Campaign Co-Chairs Susan Baker and The Honorable James A. Baker III.



Pictured above: Processing to the "East Lawn."



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Mary comes to Jesus and is honest from the start, "Jesus, if you had been here, Lazarus would not have died!" Then she begins weeping. Jesus is so moved by her pain that He, too, begins to weep.

Jesus tells the small crowd, "Roll the stone away." At which point we may have the most honest moment in the telling of the story when Martha, Mary's sister, says, "Um, Lord, it has been four days. If you open up that tomb, it ain't going to smell too good." "Open it," Jesus says.

Then Jesus, calling in some help from His heavenly Father, says, "Father, I thank you for everything, but let me stop here and pray because if they are going to continue

to believe, you and I are going to have to get Lazarus out of there." With that prayer come the words, "Lazarus, come out!" And out he comes, still wrapped in his death cloths. Without much fanfare, Jesus says simply, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Mary is honest again with Jesus. First, she was upset that her brother was dying. Then she was ticked that Jesus did not leave in time to get to heal her brother. She wants things her way and she is not holding back about it. She is not afraid to show Jesus exactly who she is — even her doubt in His power is obvious. It is how she felt at the time and there was no use hiding it from the Lord in heaven. The same is true for us. Jesus is not interested in getting to know the person you are pretending to be. He wants to get to know the person you are — warts and all.

The situation around Lazarus' death reveals a rather startling "behind the scenes" look at the kind of God Jesus is. We all know the shortened verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept," but we need to meditate and really chew on what Jesus' weeping tells us. It tells us of a God who is not disengaged from our suffering and pain. It tells us of a God who hurts when we hurt, who weeps when we weep.

Today is an important day in the life of our Parish. We are breaking ground on two new facilities that will directly respond to a vision which grew out of a Parish-wide study conducted shortly after the opening of The Church. There were many new chapters hoped for, but the two that floated to the top were programs and ministries which reached out to young adults, youth

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Pictured above: The Honorable George Bush talks to one of St. Martin's "future leaders."



Pictured above: Some of our St. Martin's youth and youth leaders leap in celebration of the new Youth and Young Adult Facility and Scout Hall.

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and young families; and becoming a Church increasingly known to help heal those broken by life's circumstances.

St. Martin's, under the outstanding leadership of its previous three rectors, has carried out this mission since its beginning in 1952. Perhaps, today, the need is as great as ever. If we look at the statistics things seem pretty grim.

One out of eight people is addicted to drugs or alcohol, and 40% of those have a dual diagnosis where their addiction is connected to a mental or nervous disorder.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

The average age today when a youth tries alcohol is between 11 and 13; the average age when Americans begin drinking is 15. Teens that begin drinking before age 15 are five times more likely to develop alcohol dependence than those who begin at age 21. Two of the leading causes of death related to persons between the ages of 15 and 24 are automobile accidents and suicide — and alcohol is the leading factor in both.<sup>2</sup>

Depression continues to be a growing problem in our modern culture. Seven percent of people suffer depression after the age of 18. In 1 out of every 33 children and 1 out of every 8 adolescents, suicide is the third leading cause of death for those

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking, Office of the Surgeon General, 2007.

between the ages of 10 and 24.<sup>3</sup>

Twenty-five percent of all cancer patients experience depression; one third of all heart attack survivors and one half of all Parkinson's patients experience suicide. By 2020, depression will be the second most common health problem in the world.<sup>4</sup>

We all know that married couples have a hard time staying together and about half of them end in divorce in America; 67% of all second marriages and 74% of all third also fail. One half of American children will see the breakup of their parents' marriage, with 40% of those being raised without a father.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> DepressionHelpSpot.com, 2006-2011.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> The School of Professional Psychology at Forest Institute, Springfield, Mo.

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*For over 55 years, the congregation of St. Martin's has been the chartering partner for Pack 354, Troop 354 and entering Troop 354. Without your support, we would not have been able to bring the scouting experience and life skills and values to so many young men.*

*— BEN ROYCE, SCOUTMASTER, TROOP 354*



Pictured above: First Lady Barbara Bush shares a smile with her son, Neil Bush, and the Rev. Dr. Russell J. Levenson, Jr.



Pictured above: Troop 354 Scoutmaster Ben Royce addressed the hundreds who gathered for our Ceremonial Groundbreaking on April 10.

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Children from broken families are nearly five times more likely to suffer damaging mental troubles than those whose parents stay together. *Family Studies* author Patricia Morgan says, "Broken families... produce homes full of conflict and chaos and they are terrible for children."<sup>6</sup>

And when families do break apart because of divorce, as they have to do sometimes for the better of all — this does not diminish the impact on overall mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health of family members who need support and care after the divorce.

It is not my intent to weigh you down on this important and really joyful day in the life of our Parish. However, it's almost as if we can hear dear Mary looking on the grave of our culture and saying, "Don't waste your time rolling the stone away; there's nothing but death there." But you and I worship a God who has more to offer death

than weeping and tears. You and I worship a God who can breathe hope, healing and life into virtually any death we encounter.

And this, my brothers and sisters, is why we are doing what we are doing today. The Great Commission was not "Stay here," but "Go there."

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Go into the world, bring the good news of the Gospel to the broken and bruised, the hurting and helpless. Tell those who do not know that there is One who can bring, not just life and salvation, but hope and healing!

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This beautiful worship space draws people within our doors every week, but there are people who are also facing a broken marriage, a child running off the rails, their own addiction, the aftermath of divorce, depression, eating disorders or grief. And frankly, many of *you* are dealing with the kinds of statistics I have mentioned today. But hear Jesus' words, "This sickness will not end in death." The St. Martin's tradition is that we are part of the answer, not part of the problem. We are called not just to curse the darkness, but to light a

candle that helps show the way to hope and healing.

Today, because of the generosity of over a thousand of our members — and we are still waiting on some of the others in our Parish family — we will begin to build facilities that will help this candle burn even brighter. We are already carrying this out in so many ways, but now we will be able to do even more. We will fill these buildings with ministries and programs for our youth and scouts; for young adults and families; for those affected by addictions and depression; and for those seeking to pick up the pieces after parts of life fall apart. We also want to provide avenues of preventative care and education for those seeking building blocks for stronger and healthier lives, marriages and families.

This is our way of laughing at death. This is us standing with Jesus, looking on what appears to be a grave and saying, "Lazarus, come out!"

Notice that when the tears stop flowing, the first place Jesus turns to is back to God; He is not interested in wowing the crowd.

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<sup>6</sup> Steve Doughty, "Broken Home Children," UK Online, 21 October, 2008.



Pictured at left: Our Rector and some of the members of the BUILDING *for* LIFE Ceremonial Groundbreaking event planning team — (left to right) Justin Jacobson, Brittney Jacobson, the Rev. Dr. Russell J. Levenson, Jr. and Carol Gallion. (Not pictured are Dennis Davis, Allie Hippard, Rachel Mahaffey, Eric Moen, Bruce Morgan, Roger Swanson and Sam Tumey.)



Pictured at right: Neil Bush



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He wants to get on with the business of healing and hope. He certainly could have clapped His hands together; perhaps waited for the crowd to get bigger; He could have said, "Abracadabra!" Yet Jesus did none of those things so that God could be glorified. In prayer, Jesus turns to God again and receives power to raise Lazarus from the dead.

We are called not just to curse the darkness, but to light a candle that helps show the way to hope and healing.

There is a great little play by Eugene O'Neill entitled, "Lazarus Laughed." The play takes up where today's story ends. It seems that once the bindings fall

off good old Lazarus, he begins at first to giggle. Giggle turns to chuckle, chuckle turns to laughter and laughter turns to uncontrollable belly laughter! Lazarus, having faced death square in the face, having made it to the other side, having been brought back to life, is no longer afraid. He knows that if he lets Jesus have all that he is, then nothing, not even death, can defeat him.

The laughter continues throughout the play. And, like most laughter, it is contagious and it begins to turn others to Jesus. His laughter begins to upset the ordered world of the pious Jewish and stoic Roman leaders. When the authorities begin to get upset and threaten Lazarus with imprisonment, he only laughs harder. When they threaten torture, he laughs all the more. Finally, the Roman Emperor Tiberius demands his execution and, even then, Lazarus meets death once again

with laughter. And the play ends with the uproarious laughter of Lazarus as he is burned at the stake.

The story is not saying that pain, suffering and loss do not matter. What it does say is that they, when handed over to the transforming power of God, do not ultimately matter because He is bigger even than death.

So, my friends, once again the St. Martin's family steps forward and together we are able to look on what many may believe to be a dying culture and say, "Come out! Come out to hope, come out to healing, come out to life and be unbound knowing the freedom of God." This is Gospel work. This is Kingdom work. This is God's work. Let us then laugh and work together, with Him, for the hope and healing of our world. Amen.

— RJL+



Pictured at left (left to right): BUILDING for LIFE Capital Campaign Leadership — the Rev. Dr. Russell J. Levenson, Jr., Laura Levenson, Kathy Ellwood, Dan Ellwood, Blake Williams, Christine Williams, Michael Donaldson, Julie Donaldson, Perry Ruthven, Laura Ruthven, John Wooldridge, Ann Wooldridge, Mary Majors Payne and Leslie Payne.

