

New Year Day Service

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[0 : 0 0] for a fresh start. Not a particularly original question on the first day of the year, but though not original, certainly appropriate. A fresh start. Wipe the slate clean and start again.

I'm sure there are many who would be very grateful for that opportunity. Perhaps, well, that sounds fine, but it just isn't like that. Now, I have no idea when I speak of wiping the slate clean. I have no idea, and perhaps not a great deal of interest, on what you have scrawled on your particular slate as you look back on this year that has concluded. Perhaps disappointments, failures, perhaps guilt, perhaps resentment for one reason or another, bitterness, resignation, emptiness. I don't know. But how about a fresh start? Now, this morning we're going to meet a man, and consider this man briefly. Meet a man who had a fresh start. And I'm talking about a seriously fresh start. I'm talking about Lazarus. Now, we've already read the passage that speaks of this man,

Lazarus, and the fresh start that he had. And as I say, this is no ordinary fresh start. This was a man who began life again. He was dead, and yet he had a fresh start. A new life was given to him.

Now, let us be very clear. Lazarus was dead. He was well dead. We're told very carefully in the account that he had been dead four days. We've read in that vivid language of the King James Version, the concern of Lazarus' sister. He stinketh. A perfectly reasonable concern, as Jesus would have the stone removed from the grave, from the cave where Lazarus was placed. He was well dead.

But he was given a fresh start. Now, maybe that is very hard to believe. If you believe Jesus to be who He claimed to be, and in the passage we have read, we have this astonishing claim of Jesus in conversation with Martha, I am the resurrection and the life.

[2 : 3 2] If that claim is true, then it's not so hard to believe that this man who made this astonishing claim could raise Lazarus from the dead and give him a fresh start. If you believe his claims, it is not unreasonable to read this account and take it at face value. If you don't believe the claims of Jesus, then I would invite you in this half an hour to suspend judgment for a wee moment as we consider some features of this new life, this fresh start that Lazarus experienced, and as we would try and apply the principles identified to you and to me. Because if it is true, if it is true that there in Bethany, 2,000 years ago, Jesus rose Lazarus from the grave, if that is true, then the implications even today on the first day of 2011 are huge for every one of our lives.

Well, let's think then about this fresh start. The first thing I want to notice, the first feature of this fresh start is that it was a God-given fresh start. When we're talking about Lazarus and the fresh start that he had, we're not in the territory of New Year resolutions.

Lazarus was in no fit state to ponder on his past and decide as an act of his will to start afresh. The boy is dead. This is not an option for him. The only way, a seemingly incredible way, but the only way Lazarus was getting a fresh start was if someone gave him new life. And only one man could do that, Jesus. And he did. He rose him from the grave and gave him a fresh start.

Now, does this, can this apply to us? You know, we can read the account. We may even read the account and say, well, yes, I'm willing to accept that that happened or may have happened, but even if it did, what has it got to do with me? How can this account have any relevance to me today? I'm not dead.

None of us here are dead. Now, some of us, and I say us, so nobody takes undue offense, some of us may appear a little comatose. An 11 o'clock start on the 1st of January is quite a big ask, I concede.

[5 : 07] But I don't think any of us here are dead. We're alive. Alive and well is maybe pushing it, but we're alive. So, what has this got to do with me? Well, Jesus himself, in his conversation with Mary and with Martha particularly, or with Martha, makes it very clear that this event, this resurrection of Lazarus, did have implications for those who were alive, for those who were not physically dead. Jesus made it very clear that the lesson to be learned from this miracle that he performed was not only concerning his power to raise to life those who are physically dead, but it had lessons for those of us who are spiritually dead. Now, what does that mean? Well, God's diagnosis, as we find it revealed in the Bible, is that we are, and I quote, dead in our trespasses and sins. From the language of the King James Bible, from our Bible, or the Bible that we use, dead in our transgressions and sins. We are, we are told, we are, in this way described, spiritually dead, devoid of spiritual life. Sin, our rebellion against God, our doing our own thing, our living our life as we see fit, has created a chasm between us and God, the author and the giver of life. And if we are to experience spiritual life, life of a different quality, on a different quality, on a different dimension, what the Bible calls eternal life, there needs to be a kind of resurrection. A new birth is one picture that is used in the Bible of this fresh start that those who are physically alive can experience and need to experience.

Now, can we do this for ourselves? Can we enjoy this fresh start? Can we experience spiritual life by some act of the will, by some effort on our part? Well, there's no way we can do that. No more than Lazarus could have given himself new physical life. No more than Lazarus there, four days dead, lying in the tomb. No more than that man could have shaken himself down and jumped up from the dead.

The very idea is ridiculous. Well, equally, we cannot give to ourselves, we cannot procure for ourselves spiritual life. This is something only God can do. The fresh start that we need is a God-given opportunity. It is a God-given gift. Again, let us listen to the words of the Scriptures, of the Apostle Paul as he wrote to the church in Rome. The wages of sin is death. That is our just reward for our sin. We are spiritually dead. But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord. The fresh start that Lazarus was given could only happen if God took the initiative and gave him a fresh start. And so it is for you and me. If we are to enjoy a fresh start, if we are going to enjoy friendship with God, then that can only be as God in His grace and in His love gives us that opportunity. That's the first feature of this fresh start in the case of Lazarus and as it could be applied to us. It was a God-given fresh start. But a second thing I want us to notice is that the fresh start germinates, if you wish. The fresh start germinates in the act of believing obedience to the command of Jesus. Now, if you are following carefully, as I'm sure you are, you may be asking, well, if you are saying that there is nothing I can do to enjoy this fresh start, then it is a cruel thing to offer it or to talk about it or to tempt me into believing it might be possible.

And then you go on to say, well, there is nothing you can actually do to procure it. It all depends on God. And so a reasonable question could be, well, what can I do if you are saying there is nothing I can do? Well, let's learn from Lazarus. What did Lazarus do in order to enjoy this fresh start? Well, what Lazarus did, and it may seem a very obvious thing to say, but I think it is an important thing to notice. Lazarus grasped the opportunity of this God-given fresh start by his act of believing obedience. Jesus spoke these words in the version that we've read, come forth. Lazarus heard and obeyed. Now, it's impossible for us to even imagine, well, it's not impossible to imagine, but it's impossible for us to know with any degree of certainty what Lazarus must have thought when he heard the voice of Jesus, this man who is lying dead in a tomb, and yet he hears the voice of Jesus. Now, when he hears the voice, at this stage, clearly he is already alive or in some nondescript zone between death and life. Now, this is pretty weird by any standard, but at this point he hears.

He hears and he recognizes the voice of Jesus. He recognizes the voice of Jesus, come forth, and what does he do? Well, he comes forth. He obeys the command that he has given. He trusts the words of command, however bizarre or unlikely it might have appeared, and he appears. And at the risk of sounding trivial about this, the picture that I confess comes to my mind is like something out of Scooby-Doo. Now, you say, what on earth is he talking about? You know, in Scooby-Doo, there's always these mummies that appear from chests and from tombs, all mummified. Well, here's Lazarus.

[11 : 47] This is Lazarus appearing. This is the picture. He's mummified. He's covered in cloths of all kinds, and he comes forth from the tomb. Now, this is pretty wild stuff. And why does he come forth?

Well, because Jesus has granted a new life, but also because he hears the words of Jesus, come forth, and he obeys. He obeys the command, and out he comes from his grave.

Now, what about you? What about me? Lazarus does not offer a direct parallel, but there are parallels. We've already noted that Jesus himself, in his conversation with Martha, makes it very clear that the intention of the miracle is to help us see the parallels, if you wish.

We are spiritually dead, but God can give us a fresh start. He can give us spiritual life, and so God also commands you. He speaks into your deathly state and commands you to repent and to believe, to repent of your sin and to believe in Jesus, the Savior of sinners, to believe in Jesus, the one who came to solve the problem of sin, the one who came to die on Calvary's tree in the place of sinners and paying the price of sinners, and paying the price of sinners, that he might offer to sinners such as we are, new life. And so, we are commanded to repent and to believe. And as we with Lazarus would respond in believing obedience, there the fresh start germinates, if we can use that language. Do you hear his voice? Will you respond in trusting obedience as he bids you to live?

The fresh start is God-given. The fresh start germinates in the act of believing obedience to the command of Jesus. But there's a further thing. There's four things I want to say. This is the third.

[13 : 54] The third thing is this. The fresh start is cultivated in the company of Jesus. So, Lazarus is alive. Is that it? Did Lazarus, as he appeared from the grave and as the grave clothes were removed from him, does he say thank you to Jesus and say, well, Jesus, thank you for this fresh start, unexpected, unexpected? But thank you. I'm grateful. And now, if you don't mind, I have a life to live. I'm going to move on. That's not what we find. Where do we find Lazarus following his resurrection as he begins this new start, this fresh start? Where do we find Lazarus cultivating his new life, enjoying his fresh start, growing in this life that has been given? Where do we find him? Well, let's read in John chapter 12. We haven't read that part of the account. It's the first occasion that we have any reference made to Lazarus following his resurrection. And here I'm reading from the church Bible. John chapter 12 and verses 1 to 3. Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Perhaps in celebration of the resurrection that had taken place, we don't know. Martha served while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard and expensive perfume.

She poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair, and the house was filled with the fragrance of the fragrance of the perfume. The fresh start. Lazarus' fresh start is cultivated in the company of Jesus. And what is he doing? This man who is enjoying this fresh start, this new life that he has been given, what is he doing? Well, we were told what he's doing in the verses that we've read.

First of all, he is honoring Jesus. A dinner was given in Jesus' honor, and Lazarus is there. It is his desire, it is his resolve in this new life he has been given, and we have to say in the life he had had before. But certainly in this new life, this new start that he has given, his resolve is to honor Jesus. What else do we find him doing? Well, he's enjoying fellowship with Jesus, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Where Jesus was, Lazarus was. It was Lazarus' concern to be close to Jesus, to listen to Jesus, to fellowship with Jesus, to enjoy friendship with Jesus.

This was how he cultivated this new life that he had been given. But what else do we find even in these short verses that we've read in chapter 12? We find Lazarus as a witness, and might we suggest, and we probably can do no more than suggest, a witness, and we suggest a participant in the extravagant worship of Jesus. We've read about Mary. This is the sister of Lazarus, and we read that she took a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume, and poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. In the following verses that we haven't read, Judas Iscariot informs us helpfully that the value of this perfume was equivalent to a year's wages of a laborer. This is a serious amount of money that Mary is extravagantly pouring out on Jesus. It was Mary who did this. And yet,

I would ask the question. I can't do more than that. I would ask the question. Mary was part of a household where Lazarus was the head of the household. Is it not reasonable to at least suggest that Lazarus would have known and approved of what Mary did? After all, he would have been the one, I would imagine, responsible for participating in decisions of this kind. Now, it may have been that Mary spontaneously, with no consultation, did what she did. But I think we can at least suggest that Lazarus may well have known and approved. He certainly didn't object to what she did. He is, as I say, a witness certainly, but perhaps even a participant in this extravagant act of worship towards Jesus. This is how he cultivates this fresh start that he has given. And what about us?

[19 : 02] Those of us who by grace are already disciples of Jesus Christ, those of us who by grace have already committed our lives committed our lives to Jesus, we also are invited to enjoy and experience a fresh start in our life of discipleship. We have been lukewarm in our service, divided in our loyalty, careless in our commitment. But today is a new day. Today is a new year. Today is a new start.

And how will we cultivate this new start that we are given? That it might be with Lazarus by honoring Jesus, granting him the place of honor in our lives and affections. Might it be with Lazarus by spending time with Jesus in his word, in prayer, in the fellowship of his people, being filled by his spirit?

Might it be by delighting in the extravagant worship of Jesus, offering, yes, our very lives as living sacrifices, which is our reasonable act of worship? Will you? Will you do so? Will you offer your life graceful, in an extravagant act of worship? If we think of Mary for a moment as she pours this perfume on Jesus' feet? Can you imagine for a moment that Mary, with this pint of pure nard, as she is about to pour the perfume on the feet of Jesus, can you imagine for a moment Mary beginning to hesitate and say, well, how much is this worth actually? Maybe I'll just pour half of it out. That would be pretty good.

It'd be a lot more than anybody else is doing. Yeah, maybe I'll just keep half of it for another occasion. Did that thought cross her mind? No. She pours it all out, everything, that we too might follow her example as we begin a new year and are granted a fresh start. The final thing that I want us to notice, a feature of this fresh start in the experience of Lazarus and as it can be applied to us, and it is this, the final thing. The fresh start flowers. It's germinated, it's cultivated, and now it flowers in further fresh starts by means of the grateful testimony of Lazarus. If we read in that same chapter 12 and verses 10 and 11, we are given another detail in this account, one of the consequences of these events. We read there, so the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well.

They'd already had plans to kill Jesus. Now Lazarus is added to their list. Why? Well, we read, for on account of him, many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.

[22 : 12] On account of Lazarus, many believed in Jesus. Now, it's true that this did not involve Lazarus doing anything. Lazarus was, if you wish, a walking, talking, breathing, heart-beating testimony to the power of Jesus over death. He didn't need to say anything. He didn't need to gather people around and tell his story. The very fact that he was alive was powerful testimony to what Jesus had done.

Simply being alive was sufficient to persuade others concerning who Jesus was and to persuade others to put their trust in Jesus. But he is all the same and can be described as a testimony to Jesus, to those around him. And his testimony is instrumental in others seeking, procuring, and enjoying a fresh start as they put their trust in Jesus. And we say, well, how does that apply to us? It's not so different for us. As we obey the command of Jesus to rise from our slumber and to live, to live life in all its fullness as he intends for us, to live in the company of and in the power of the risen Jesus, others will take notice. Some may mock, some may cross to the other side of the road and take avoiding action, some may even hate. But some will be drawn to listen for themselves to the voice of Jesus who has transformed us and who has given us new life. They will be drawn to listen to that voice as he invites them to a new start, to new life. So, what's it going to be?

A new start or more of the same? Life in all its fullness or the drudgery of mediocrity? Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, the one who died on the cross in our place and who rose triumphant from the grave, is here this morning, present in the preaching of his Word and in the moving of his Spirit, inviting you, commanding you, come out from the grave. Come out from the shadows and live. Live the life that God created you to live in friendship with God and dedicated to the service of God. Come forth and live. Let us pray.