

“Hope is Humanity Seeing the Possibilities: Lazarus, Come forth!”

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison 10/7/18

Church of the Covenant’s 64th Anniversary

We each deal with death in different ways. Some of us are overcome with grief and say nothing. Others of us are overcome with grief and let it all out—mourning effortlessly. Some of us feel guilty for not showing our feelings, or just feel numb altogether; then we feel guilty for not feeling the emotions we think we ought to have. Death is a strange thing. It has been a part of our civilization as a human race since its beginning, but how we feel once confronted with it, still somehow feels new. Each generation wrestling with it, as if for the first time. Some of us can cry when watching a movie or even a commercial but strain to muster a tear when we lose a dear friend or family member. We think to ourselves, “There must be something wrong with me.” No, there is nothing wrong with you. You are simply human. And so was Jesus, at least in part. We see a very human Jesus in John 11 when he has lost his dear friend Lazarus. The result is what we coined as “the shortest verse in the Bible” —“Jesus wept.” Filled with loss and overcome with personal grief, Jesus broke down and cried. And like any of us watching our leader, our parent, or someone we look up to more than anything, to see them publicly grieve, to cry—makes us feel helpless, doesn’t it? We feel like if he or she’s crying and emotionally vulnerable, then surely I have much to worry about. And I have the distinct feeling that Jesus’ disciples probably felt like that as they walked along to Lazarus’ tomb. Jesus wanted to see where his good friend had been buried, and naturally he grieved at such a big loss. For, Lazarus and his sisters—Mary and Martha—had been a surrogate family for him when he would spend time in Jerusalem. Their house had been where Jesus was truly himself, a home away from home, a place to kick off his sandals as it were; their house was in Bethany, which was a small village just outside the Jerusalem gates. Jesus had just been “Jesus” there. He was their friend. They all laughed and joked together: Lazarus his brother, Mary and Martha his sisters. He loved them more than anything—and then to lose Lazarus so suddenly was just too much to bear.

I think most all of us here can identify with loss. Some of us still grieve for the losses we have suffered in this life, whether it be people or things. I am not here to lecture you on the downside of obsessively clinging to the past; I will leave that into your hands to discern and remedy. However, I will say that if you want to find hope in this life, to be captivated by the possibilities of the future—then you must look forward, not backward. And when Jesus was walking towards the tomb, he was indeed looking to the past and grieving in the present. How many of us do that too? Sudden change can throw many of us off kilter and we become painfully aware of the unfamiliar that quickly surrounds us—and for most of us, that can be a very uncomfortable experience. Jesus was no exception to that pain. He felt it too. But then he made a change. Jesus chose to see a different future—a future that involved Lazarus returning to life. Jesus saw the possibility that none of us probably would have envisioned, but Jesus did. And the sacred words spoken came out of Jesus’ mouth, like from the King James Version of the Bible that many of us knew so well when growing up: “Lazarus, Come forth!”

We have done much together in this past year at the Church of the Covenant. Besides gaining a new pastor, which is always either a traumatic or transformational experience, we have grown together as a community—getting to know each other, learn from each other, hear each other’s stories. We have had many meals together, prayed together, and perhaps even wept together. We worked hard to re-establish intimate relationships with other faith communities, like our friends at Agudath Sholom

Synagogue and our dear Sufi Muslim community in Bedford. It was for us, a “Lazarus, Come forth!” moment. We took the courageous steps of participating in racial reconciliation efforts like the Maundy Thursday Service at Rivermont Ave. Baptist Church and our pulpit swap with my dear friend Rev. Bert Davis, and we are to have another pulpit swap with my friend Rev. Paul Boothby of First Unitarian later this month, October 21. “Lazarus, Come forth!” And continuing this journey of understanding the complexities of race and our city, I am embarking on a 5 day journey with a group of local black and white pastors starting tomorrow, journeying through the Civil Rights trail from Danville to Atlanta to Montgomery to Selma to Birmingham to Memphis, stopping at various key sites along the way—posturing to learn together, fasting and praying, in hopes of gaining understanding, compassion, and vision for the future as well as insight into our past. “Lazarus, Come forth!” This opportunity did not come overnight but is the product of this past year’s efforts to become interconnected with our city, our community at large—to know its needs, and respond accordingly has been a continual process—a result from multiple meetings with the mayor and city leaders, meetings with Thomas Road and Liberty, meetings with our interfaith clergy members, meetings with many, many other key personnel in this city. And we have seen some fruit from our labor. “Lazarus, Come forth!” The Red Letter Christian Revival found safe harbor on our grounds earlier this year as they sought to plant new seeds of unity and change, and we gained new friends as a result. “Lazarus, Come forth!” Visiting Church of the Saviour twice this past year, reconnected us to our historical, mutual roots within the Cosby legacy—finding our natural bonds encouraging and supportive. “Lazarus, Come forth!” The movement towards a local Freedom School is well underway, and our congregation has supported it—as Dori Baker and Will Cardwell and others push to see it come to fruition this next summer. “Lazarus, Come forth!” Our Lodge has hosted a growing number of young adults weekly, from all walks of life, multiple faiths and backgrounds, colors and creeds, sexual orientations and immigration statuses, meeting together to hear each other’s stories, to see what the possibilities might be—together. “Lazarus, Come forth!”

Chris Russell has hosted a monthly drum circle here for months now, bringing together such a vibrant, eclectic group of people seeking connection and healing—both young and old, and they find it here on these grounds every month. “Lazarus, Come forth!” Having Tasha reconnect us intimately with our sister organization, Camp Kum-Ba-Yah, helping us to become more involved and invested is a critical moment as the camp seeks to buy the property from LCF and needs our love and help. “Lazarus, Come forth!” Common Grounds Café has continued to thrive, providing financial support to so many great organizations in this city, breathing life into sacred spaces that work with our city’s most vulnerable—our children. “Lazarus, Come forth!” The Haven, after twenty years of meeting as a Mission Group faithfully, finally hired its first fulltime employee—Niles Comer, their project director, to bring to life their dream of a residential recovery program. “Lazarus, Come forth!” Thanks to the persistence and vision of people like Alys Hickox and Mike Mayer and others, Kinderwoods, a dedicated preschool play space, is now alive and kicking. “Lazarus, Come forth!” Thanks to the heart of people like Paul Henderson and the Refugee Partnership, Lynchburg is getting ready to receive its first refugee family. “Lazarus, Come forth!” Or Mike Hickox and his heart to see a new ideology accessible in this region, and is looking with me to see what the possibilities of a Wisdom School, an interfaith movement of intellectuals and thinkers sharing their ideas with the next generation, might actually look like as an online entity. “Lazarus, Come forth!” And after decades of wrestling with how to help people in our church community become on-boarded with our unique, “mysterious” ways—we have created a process of learning more about us, which is a continuation of Pastor David Edwards’ *The Journey of a Lifetime* as a four module program to be made accessible, digestible, and hopefully interesting and

personally beneficial, through our Lunch-and-Learn sessions after church on designated Sundays; we had about 14 folks in our first one last week. “So, Lazarus, Come forth!” The question now is, How will Lazarus come forth in this next church year? How will you call into a new ministry, a new vision, a change for the better, for our community and the community at large? What will your personal, “Lazarus, Come forth!” look like, sound like? This is the crossroads you and I stand at, an intersection of need, faith, and possibility.

Will you see our need for young families and say, “Lazarus, Come forth!”? Will you see what Gordon Cosby, our “spiritual uncle,” called a need for “extreme diversity,” and say boldly, “Lazarus, Come forth!”? Will you see the continued racial inequity in our city and say, “Lazarus, Come forth!”?

If you would be so bold, so moved, so courageous, so filled with faith—to see even the dead rise to life. Then say it with me, “Lazarus, Come forth! Lazarus, Come forth!”