

VESPERS HOMILY
6 NOVEMBER 2016

JOHN 11: 32 – 44

PSALM: 24

Let me tell you a story. Years ago I was in a room of the Intensive Care unit of South Georgia Medical Center, not the unit as it is now but as it was in 1989. I was giving Last Rites to a woman, a parishioner, who infrequently attended church. I really didn't know her well but I had heard that she had one daughter to whom she had not spoken in years; her daughter was not present in the room, nor were any relatives or friends.

The staff, several nurses and one physician were standing back as I spoke, watching the oscilloscope; it measured the woman's vital signs, one beat at a time, by peaks on a thin red line on a screen. The peaks were becoming less frequent, farther apart and less strong, as I was speaking. Just as I said "May her soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercies of God, rest in peace," the peaks ceased entirely, the line went flat; she died.

I'm sure others have been present at that moment. If you have you know that that is a moment of great activity. The physician pronounces the person dead and states a time; the nurses disconnect wires and tubes and cover the body.

This time nobody moved. I was surprised. They didn't move for at least two full minutes. After those two frozen minutes the red line on the oscilloscope began to change, peaks appeared; the pulse on the monitor began again, slowly at first, then quicker and stronger. She was alive.

I wondered, but never asked her, what she had experienced in death; was there really a tunnel, a beckoning light, and a warm glow as we so often read about? Perhaps it is true. What would she have said; what would Lazarus have said? Perhaps another question would be what was it like to be recalled from death to live a second time? What changes did you experience?

The parishioner lived for about another year. I am told that in that year whatever had driven her and her daughter apart was reconciled and they were reunited.

How many more years did Lazarus have? We really don't know. We really know nothing about him. His name is actually Eleazar, which means in Hebrew "God is my help."

The name Lazarus is a Latin translation, probably by Jerome in the Vulgate Bible. The name Lazarus appears only in these few lines of John's Gospel and in a story about a beggar and a rich man named Dives; not the same person at all. It is written in the next chapter of John that Lazarus and Mary and Martha entertain Jesus with supper when Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem to the palm procession, His trial and Crucifixion and, ironically His own death and Resurrection.

There are, however, a number of legends that have been centered on the future of the restored-to-life Lazarus.

The Eastern Orthodox churches have the tradition that with Jesus' crucifixion there was a plot to kill Lazarus also and that Lazarus fled to the island of Cyprus. He was there on Cyprus during the missionary visit of Paul and Barnabas, who, perhaps aware of his history and relationship to Jesus, appointed him the first bishop of Cyprus. According to the legend he served as Bishop for thirty years and was never seen to smile. Also according to legend, Lazarus' vestment as Bishop, his "omnophorion," a garment much like a priest's stole but much bigger, was woven by The Blessed Virgin Mary herself.

On his second death Lazarus' relics were moved to the greater church in Constantinople. Then, in 1204, when Constantinople itself was sacked by Christian Crusaders on their way to the Holy Land for no apparent reason other than it seemed like a good idea at the time, the relics were moved to Marseilles in France where they promptly disappeared.

However, in 1972, during restorations being made in the church at Lanarca, Cyprus, the church at which Lazarus served as bishop, human remains were found under the altar. They were quickly assumed to be the relics of Lazarus. Some of those

relics, perhaps all, were given to the Russian Orthodox Church and are now to be seen at the Zatachaievsky monastery near Moscow.

On the other hand, the church in Western Europe, principally the Roman Catholics, had a legend that the Jewish authorities, aware of the significance of their presence, put Lazarus and Mary and Martha in a boat that had no sails, no oars and no rudder, waved goodbye and shoved them off on the Mediterranean.

Miraculously, the voyage took them directly to Provence in southern France. Once there the three parted, each preaching in a different area of Gaul. Lazarus went to Marseilles, note the recurrent connection with that place. There he became, of course, the first Bishop. In the persecution of Christians under the Emperor Domitian Bishop Lazarus was taken to a cavern and was beheaded. His body is said to have been buried in the cathedral in Autun.

Marseilles kept his head.

In His Holy Name.