

Fifth Sunday in Lent 5, Year A
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I want to tell you about a church I knew back in Chicago. It was in a neighborhood on the northwest side of the city that, twenty-five years ago, wasn't considered a very desirable place to live or work. And in the middle of that neighborhood stood an old Episcopal church—wooden and kind of crooked and falling down. The congregation had shrunk over the years and was a little depressed. They decided to call a new priest to be their rector, thinking that maybe this would be their last hurrah.

But she had different ideas. She got to know the people and told them that they still had a mission. Their new priest did some strange things. She moved all the pews around so that the tiny congregation faced one another in a circle rather than having to sit with just a few people barely filling the large sanctuary. She suggested that the parish partner with a local elementary school and take the time to ask the students what they needed from the church. They discovered that the school was chronically low on printer paper. So the priest and the congregation started a printer paper drive. She took the reams of paper and used them to build an altar in the middle of the sanctuary, and they celebrated the Eucharist on a printer paper altar the day before they delivered the paper to the neighborhood school. On All Saints' Day, she invited the congregation to write the names of their beloved dead on colorful pieces of paper and hang them all through the rafters of their little crooked church. And then, one Easter, she hung a disco ball on the ceiling that dropped down right when Jesus was raised from the dead so that everyone would be able to dance in celebration of the Resurrection.

This little church had what I might call a Lazarus mindset. Many things in their life seemed to be dead. They worried about money, about attendance, about the future. But, with a little encouragement, this church started to believe and to embody what we learn in many places in scripture, but famously in this morning's story of the raising of Lazarus. Things don't stay dead in God's economy. Seeds fall to the ground to be buried, only to rise again. Beloved brothers and friends are called out of the grave, still wrapped in their graveclothes. And even Saviors, killed by the state, come back triumphant.

I find it quite hard to live with a Lazarus mindset. There is a lot of death all around us. I see war, see poverty, I see cruelty. In the church, I see the increasing secularization of our society as well as our loss of status and of moral authority. But then, I have to remember. Seeds fall to the ground and are buried. Lazarus spent time in the grave. The church will have to wander around in the graveyard now and again.

When I think back on this church in Chicago, the details of their story aren't as important to me as their mindset. They knew that God is in the business of resurrection. And so, they went out in faith, acting as if God's power of resurrection was right in the midst of them. They took a leap and believed that—some evidence to the contrary—they had the power of Jesus among them, calling them out of the grave. Now, don't get me wrong. It wasn't all disco balls and outreach

ideas. They eventually had to do a capital campaign and fix their building, just like every old church in America will have to if it wants to find a way to keep performing its mission in 2023.

But I always admired the order in which they did their work. They fixed their building because they wanted to keep doing the work of resurrection in their community. They didn't fix it so that they could BEGIN that work. It's a subtle distinction but I think a really important. Our new parish hall is not something that we need to do so that God will bless us. God has blessed us, and so we have decided that we want to give to the next generation of Christians so that the good work of Jesus can continue here at St. Mark's. We are lucky to be alive at this time and in this place to be able to answer this call.

I know that there have been times over the last couple of years when we have felt a bit dead. When we were stuck on Zoom services and we worried about the health of loved ones, or when we were deep in internal negotiations about what we should do with our parish hall. I know that these were times when we could feel some death creeping into our community.

But when I look out at us today, I see a Lazarus mindset. I see a group of people who have been brought to life by a powerful God. I see Christian people who, maybe foolishly, believe that death is not the last answer for our savior Jesus.

So, spend this last week of Lent listening to the call of Jesus. Listen to him calling you—as an individual and as a whole church—to come out of the grave, to live again. I do not know for sure what these next years will bring for us, but I do know that God is constantly inviting us to cast off the clothes of the grave and to live. Whatever comes in these next few years, we will need the Lazarus mindset that is our birthright as Christian people. The world will try to tell us what won't work, will even try to tell us that we are dead. But we know better. We know that the God who made us continues to call us to abundant life. Maybe we don't have a disco ball in our sanctuary, but perhaps we shouldn't entirely rule it out. Amen.