

Scripture

John 11:1-3, 17-44

Christ's Power Displayed**We stand in awe as Jesus raises Lazarus from death.**

- ◆ Jesus travels to Bethany where he comforts his friends Mary and Martha by raising their brother Lazarus from the dead.
- ◆ Older children are not immune from human fears about death and the end of life. We can acknowledge their feelings even as we affirm God's life-giving power over every fear.
- ◆ Today's session explores the gospel story together with the season of Lent.

Core Session

- ◆ Getting Started
- ◆ Today's Gospel
- ◆ Eye-Witness Reports
- ◆ Praying Together

Enrichment

- ◆ Explore the Good News
- ◆ Gospel Conversations
- ◆ Express Yourself: Go with the Flow! (*straws, balloons, air-dry clay*)
- ◆ Praying with Music: Johnson's "My Sisters and Brothers"
- ◆ Lenten Challenges
- ◆ Info: Where You'll Find Everything Else

Helps for Leaders

- ◆ More about Today's Scriptures
- ◆ Reflection
- ◆ The World of the Bible: Crucifixion and Resurrection
- ◆ The World of the Bible: More on the Gospel of John

✓ Getting Started (5-15 minutes)

Activity Soundtrack: Play Smetana's "The Moldau."
(Open your Spring-A Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Companion Music for options on obtaining this music.)

Participants reflect on their understanding of life and death.

Distribute materials. Ask:

- ◆ Please draw or write something that shows how you think life and death are different.

After 5-10 minutes, ask volunteers to share their drawings and writings. Discuss:

- ◆ What is the difference between a rock and a plant? a rock and a cat? a rock and a person?
- ◆ What is life? What is death?
- ◆ What do you think happens when we die?
- ◆ Have you known someone who has died? How did it make you feel? How did you handle your feelings?

If one of your participants has experienced the death of a friend or family member, he or she may welcome an opportunity to talk aloud about the loss.

One teenager, whose sister died of cancer while he was in middle school, recalls, "When I went back to school, no one would talk to me about her. Not my friends and not my teachers. One kid teased me about her, and I was so angry I got into a fight. I didn't get into trouble for the fight, and that was the only way I knew my teachers knew what had happened."

✓ Today's Gospel (10-15 minutes)

Participants discuss the story of Jesus and Lazarus.

Help participants find **John 11:1-3, 17-44** in their Bibles. Ask participants to follow along as you read the story aloud.

This is a *long* reading; make your reading as dramatic as possible. Some participants may prefer to listen without trying to follow along in their Bibles. After the reading, discuss:

- ◆ What do you think Jesus feels about Lazarus? Martha? Mary? Why?
- ◆ How do you think Mary and Martha feel as they wait for Jesus to arrive?

- ◆ According to verse 27, what does Martha believe about Jesus?
- ◆ How does Jesus feel about the death of his friend?
- ◆ How do you think Mary and Martha feel after seeing Lazarus come back to life?
- ◆ How do you feel about Jesus after hearing this story? Why?

✓ Eye-Witness Reports (10-40 minutes)

Participants respond in writing or art to today's gospel.

Ask each participant to either write an imaginary letter from a character in today's story or draw an imaginary photograph from an event from today's story. For example, one participant could pretend to be Mary writing to a friend about what happened. Another participant could draw a picture of Lazarus coming out of the tomb.

After 10-15 minutes' work, invite participants to share their finished work.

✓ Praying Together (5 minutes)

Invite participants to continue experimenting with using scripture verses as prayer. Help the participants memorize these words from **John 11:25**: *I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live.*

Memorize the verse together by saying it together slowly and rhythmically several times. Then pause and say:

- ◆ Think about life and death.
- ◆ Silently tell Jesus what worries you the most about death.
- ◆ Silently ask Jesus what you most want to know about life and death.

Pause, then slowly repeat once more the scripture verse above. Close by praying:

- ◆ Lord Jesus, you came to your friends Lazarus, Martha and Mary when they needed you. Help us know that you are with us when we need you, too.
Amen.

Note: Distribute this week's *At Home with the Good News* to group members (or e-mail it to families).

□ Explore the Good News

(5-15 minutes)

Page 1 of today's *Explore the Good News* revisits the Langston Hughes poem "Walkers with the Dawn and Morning" introduced in the session for the 4th Sunday in Lent. You can use this poem and the questions provided to extend the discussion of today's gospel.

On page 2 group members will find the scripture skills activity Explore God's Word. Today's version asks group members first to imagine themselves present at the scene of today's story then to write postcards describing what they've seen. Ask them to complete the activity, then share their finished ideas.

□ Gospel Conversations (15-30 minutes)

Participants invent conversations based on today's gospel.

Divide participants into pairs. Ask each pair to pick two characters from today's gospel story and invent a conversation between them based on today's reading.

Examples:

- ◆ Mary and Martha wonder why Jesus did not come in time to save Lazarus.
- ◆ Jesus arrives. Martha speaks to him about Lazarus' death.
- ◆ Lazarus speaks to Mary after he has been raised from the dead.

After 5-10 minutes' work, gather the participants together. Ask volunteers to share their roleplays with the other participants. Discuss:

- ◆ What more do you wish the Bible had told us about this story?
- ◆ How does this story fit in with your ideas about life and death?
- ◆ What more do you wish you knew about life and death?
- ◆ If we could see Jesus in this room this morning, what question would you want to ask him most? Why?

□ Express Yourself (10-20 minutes)

Go with the Flow!

Activity Soundtrack: Play Smetana's "The Moldau." (Open your Spring-A *Seasonal Resources* folder, then click on *Companion Music* for options on obtaining this music.) This lovely music captures the rippling of water in streams that mingle and join to form a mighty river.

Before the session review the contents of the *Express Yourself... Go with the Flow!* poster, attached to this document. This poster is designed as a group of enrichment activities built around the center photograph titled "Fountain in front of St. Peter's."

In the session first read to group members verses from **Ezekiel 37:1-14** that describe new life in the valley of dry bones. Then play music as you view the photograph together. Explain:

- ◆ Jesus and his ancestors lived in dry lands. In the desert, you never forget that water is one of the most important sources of life.
- ◆ We have water in our church, too. We have a baptismal font to which we bring new people who want to join the Church. Just as in our daily life, the Church's water gives life—a new life in Christ.

Read aloud to the group members information about water found on the poster, then invite group members to follow the directions under the activity "Make a Fountain," found on the poster. Group members follow the directions to make their own fountains of water.

Note: View "Fountain in front of St. Peter's," attached to this document.

□ Praying with Music (15 minutes)

Johnson's "My Sisters and Brothers"

Listen together to "My Sisters and Brothers." (Open your Spring-A *Seasonal Resources* folder, then click on *Companion Music* for options on obtaining this music.)

As the song plays, write the lyrics of the first verse on the board or newsprint:

*Well, I want to say to my sisters and brothers,
Keep the faith.
And when the storms rise and the winds blow,
Go on at a steady pace.*

(cont. on p. 4)

*Now when the battle is fought and the victory's won,
We can all shout together, "We have overcome!"
And we can talk to the Father and the Son,
When we make it to the promised land.*

Written by: Charles Johnson.
© 2007 Lamb and Lion Records. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

As the music continues, ask:

- ◆ The singers of this song talk about battles or storms they might face.
- ◆ When we use this language, we often don't mean a real war or the kind of storm that has lots of wind and rain. Instead we are talking about hard times or difficult situations.
- ◆ In today's gospel, what storm or hard times did Lazarus face? Martha? Mary? Jesus?
- ◆ What victory happened in today's gospel?
- ◆ How did the people in today's gospel help each other?
- ◆ Think of our daily lives. What "storms" or "battles" do we or our friends or families face?
- ◆ How could people together do a better job facing these hard times than one person alone?

Ask group members to form pairs or trios. Explain:

- ◆ With your friends, invent a skit that shows a "storm" or "battle"—a hard time or a difficult situation—that an ordinary person might face.
- ◆ Show how people together can help each other in this hard time or difficult situation.

After 5-10 minutes' work, invite volunteers to share their finished skits. Discuss:

- ◆ The chorus of "My Sisters and Brothers" tells us, "If we walk together...we won't ever have to worry. Through this world of trouble, we've got to love one another":
- ◆ To whom did Mary and Martha turn when faced with Lazarus's illness and death?
- ◆ How could Jesus help us when we're hurting or troubled?
- ◆ How can we help people weather life's storms? survive life's battles?

Invite group members to listen once more to "My Sisters and Brothers."

□ Lenten Challenges (10-20 minutes)

Participants review the Lenten challenges from a poster made in the session for the 1st Sunday in Lent. As necessary, review with group members that we are now in the season of Lent. Lent, which lasts 40 days, prepares us for the feast of Easter. The Church asks us to pick one or more ways to change our lives so that we become more like Jesus.

Some ways that people use are prayer, doing without food or something else we're used to, giving money to the poor, reading the Bible, changing a habit or making peace. Gather group members around the poster.

Discuss:

- ◆ What ideas did we try this week? (*Accept that participants may not have tried any.*) What difference *did* our ideas make? What difference *could* our ideas make?
- ◆ What could you do for just one day to make a difference with someone younger than you?
- ◆ What's one small habit we might try to change just one time this week?

INFO Where You'll Find Everything Else

- ◆ Attached to this Session Plan you will find:
 - Backgrounds and reflections for today's readings, titled *More about Today's Scriptures*.
 - An optional (and ongoing) *Faith Skills* activity exploring the Church.
 - A printable copy of *The Apostles' Creed*, to use in the optional Faith Skills activity.
 - A helpful article looking at *Older Children and the Gospel*.
 - The *Express Yourself... Go with the Flow!* poster, to be used in today's Express Yourself activity.
 - A family paper, *At Home with the Good News*, to print and distribute *or* to e-mail to families for use at home.
- ◆ Open your Spring-A *Seasonal Resources* folder, then click on *Seasonal Articles* to find:
 - Information on Spring-A's *Models of the Faith*.
 - An article delving more deeply into *The Gospel of John*.
 - A helpful *Holy Week Overview*, for leaders and/or family members.
 - The *Introduction for Intermediate* for **Living the Good News**.

More about Today's Scriptures

Today's readings celebrate the new life promised to believers through Jesus, the Christ. The prophet Ezekiel announces that, at the word of the Lord, God will restore the people and breathe into them God's Spirit. In Romans, Paul asserts that those who belong to Christ have Christ's Spirit living within, both enlivening and empowering them. In the gospel, Jesus demonstrates his power to give life by raising his friend Lazarus from the dead.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Ezekiel's message of hope, addressed to the despairing exiles in Babylon, begins with his vision of the valley of dry bones. Even as God shows Ezekiel the bones of those long dead lying dry and stripped of flesh, God promises renewal to Israel.

In a radical act of new creation, not dependent on historical probability or on their moral or religious worthiness, the Lord will bring them out of the grave of Babylon to their home in Israel and put the Spirit in them. The vision is not of individual or even corporate resurrection, but of the community's restoration.

Romans 8:6-11

In this reading, Paul contrasts life in the flesh with life in the Spirit. Paul uses the "Spirit of God" (v. 9), the "Spirit of Christ" (v. 9), and "Christ in you (plural)" (v. 10) interchangeably. He emphasizes that the source of the Spirit is God, that the full manifestation of the Spirit is in Christ, and that Christians experience the Spirit communally in the Christian community.

But Christ's indwelling does not exempt Christians from physical death, for their bodies are still mortal, subject to death. But it does endow them with a new quality of life that will allow them to triumph finally over death. Christ's resurrection marked the beginning of the age to come. At the culmination of that age, death will be destroyed. Until then, through the Spirit, God brings that future into the present and Christians begin to live their new life.

John 11:1-45

John here combines a miracle narrative and a teaching dialogue. The result makes clear the meaning of this last and greatest of Jesus' signs revealing "the glory of God" (v. 40), that is, God's visible presence manifested in the person and acts of Jesus. The raising of Lazarus solidifies the hostility of the authorities against Jesus and marks the transition from his ministry to his passion.

The note that Lazarus had been dead for four days (burial customarily took place within 24 hours) establishes that he was truly dead, for popular belief held that the soul of a person remained near the body for three days.

Jesus reacts at the horror of death with intense emotion, mingling grief, compassion and anger. He prays for the bystanders, that they may perceive the truth of this sign. As God's word gave life and light in creation, so now the Word made flesh gives light and life as signs of the eternal life that he gives.

Reflection

We've all experienced the frustrations caused by delays. "If you'd gotten the tickets sooner, the movie wouldn't be sold out!" "If I hadn't waited to buy that plane ticket, I could've gotten a direct flight!" "If you had made your deposit earlier, the bank wouldn't have charged you for the overdraft." "If only we could leave work early enough to beat rush hour!"

So Martha's complaint to Jesus, while a more serious matter, sounds familiar: "If you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21). Yet she pushes further, dares to hope for more, in the mysterious way that Jesus' mother mentions the wine shortage at Cana. Her attitude contrasts with that of the bystanders, who never dream that this "procrastinator" can still do something powerful.

It's lovely to think that Jesus responds to Martha's encouragement. Angry with the trappings of death, he asserts who he most deeply is: "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). Gateway to life, he calls his own by name. And Lazarus responds, lurching into daylight, blinking his eyes. Do we, like Martha, place our trust in the source of all life, and like Lazarus move, albeit awkwardly, toward him?

The World of the Bible

Crucifixion and Resurrection

Crucifixion was the most painful torture the ancient world had devised. Besides the pain from scourging, beating, loss of blood and lack of vital fluids, when one's arms and legs were fixed to a cross by tying with rope or nailing, the victim began a slow process of asphyxiation.

As the upper body muscles rigidly tightened in prolonged contraction, breathing became more and more difficult and painful. The only relief was to push oneself up by using one's legs. When the legs could no longer lift the body up, breathing stopped and the victim died. Thus death could be hastened by breaking the victim's legs (John 19:31-32).

What then happened on Easter was a complete surprise to the disciples. The Jesus that they had known and who had surely died was suddenly experienced as alive again. This new life, described as resurrection, was not just a restoration of one's former earthly life—a resuscitation from the dead—but a whole new way of existing.

The prophets Elijah and Elisha had brought people back to this life, as had Jesus for the daughter of Jairus, the son of the widow of Nain, and his beloved friend Lazarus. Although their return from the dead left them temporarily alive again, they were still subject to death. But Jesus' resurrection was a new life that would not be subject to death again. It was eternal life—permanent and undying existence in the presence of God forever.

The World of the Bible

More on the Gospel of John

Although not directly based on the other gospels, John's good news about Jesus is rooted in the same Christian traditions. He stresses Jesus' divinity as God's Son and the community's equality as Jesus' friends. More than any other gospel, John stresses the intimate relationship of Jesus the Son, to God the Father.

Jesus is the Word of God, the revealer of the mystery of God in our midst. He has come down from God to show us who God is and what God wants. He can do this because of his personal experience and his special relationship with God. He teaches in long speeches and performs signs that help us understand his message. Before he returns, he gives us the Holy Spirit to carry on his work and to abide with us in his place.

Jesus calls disciples into intimacy with him and so with God. His disciples are no longer merely pupils, but "friends" (15:15). John's community is a group conscious of its intimate relationship to Jesus, as Jesus' words at the Last Supper make clear. They are a community of Jesus' friends who share the life of Jesus because they share the Holy Spirit. They are characterized by their love for one another. They are to love as Jesus has loved them—a love that is not only intimate but which gives everything for the beloved. Jesus' death is the ultimate sign of his love.

A mysterious figure appears in John's gospel. This "beloved disciple" is the model of loving friendship for John's congregation. He is so intimate with Jesus that he can rest his head on Jesus at the last supper (13:23). In contrast to Peter, he faithfully follows Jesus during the passion, even getting Peter into the courtyard of the High Priest (18:15). Although Peter denies Jesus and runs away, the beloved disciple stands at the foot of the cross (19:26). Jesus tells the beloved disciple to care for His mother. After the resurrection, the beloved disciple more quickly believes in the resurrection (20:8) and recognizes the mysterious risen Lord (21:7).

John invites us to build a community in which "all might be one" (17:21). His ideal of loving friendship can help us create renewed experiences of Christian community in which people really know one another, pray together and reach out to others through their witness and concern.