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Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8
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What Mary did in the story – stunning, startling, moving – we can barely get our minds around it. She is poor, like all the other characters in the story, but she has come for a flask of ridiculously expensive ointment, the kind of thing a poor person might maybe see once in their lifetime. She does not hold it back for herself but at this meal she sees Jesus, she snaps off the top of that flask, and she just wastes it. She pours it out on Jesus' feet so profound is her devotion to him, so deep is her love for him. But I would say that that is not the most amazing part of this story. The most amazing moment comes – did you hear it? – When it said *And Lazarus was at table with them*, and Lazarus was at table with them. This is John, Chapter 12. In John Chapter 11 Lazarus, you may remember, had died, and he had been dead for four days. And Jesus raised him up out of the tomb and now he is back at table with them. This is startling, isn't it?

Imagine what it would be like to be sitting at a table once again with someone that you had loved who had died. And if such a person were back eating with you, wouldn't that change everything? Wouldn't we be more tender? Wouldn't we be more joyful? Wouldn't we be less likely to get tripped up by little petty annoyances if someone who had died were back at the table with us as Lazarus was with his sisters, Mary and Martha? Now you may not even believe in that kind of thing, dead people coming back to life. Maybe you think that it was prehistoric medicine and they didn't really understand death. Maybe you think he had a near-death kind of experience. Maybe you, like many modern people, simply don't think of the Biblical story as being historically reliable.

You know, I was at dinner the other night with some friends. There's this group of friends, we meet periodically, we visit, we talk about books that we've been reading, and then we go to dinner. And what's interesting about this particular group of men is that none of them believe in God and most of them think you're a real flake if you do believe in God, except me, and we generally don't raise the topic of God when we're together. I guess they avoid it out of respect for me, which I appreciate in a way. But once in awhile it comes up and it came up this past week because we started talking about Charles Darwin, and one of my friends, he couldn't let it alone. He chided me and said, "How could any intelligent person after Darwin believe in God?" I couldn't think how to respond to this. Was he saying I was not an intelligent person? I wasn't sure what to do with it. I tried as best and respectfully as I could to make a case for why I, in fact, believe in God. We can talk about that another day. So I was thinking about Darwin, and what is interesting is that after we had that conversation we're still friends. That happened in Darwin's own life. His wife, Emma, was a very pious Christian, never missed church. When she died, she fully believed that Jesus was her Lord and Savior and she would be raised with him. Darwin and his wife, Emma, loved each other deeply, even though they believed very, very differently. I talked to my friends and I said, "You know, I'm a science guy and I really believe that Darwin was absolutely right about the way crustaceans, lizards and baboons come to be. I think it was absolutely the right explanation." But I said, "At a certain point we differ from Darwin's project. Darwin was all about the survival of the fittest, but in the church we are

interested not just in the fittest but in the lowliest, in the weakest. We believe in the lifting up of the weakest. We do not believe in the survival of the fittest. We believe in the survival of – this isn't a word – the deadest. We believe that those who die, it's not the end for them. Darwin believed in natural selection, but we believe in a kind of unnatural selection, a kind of supernatural selection. Darwin believed in randomness, randomness, but we don't believe in randomness. We believe in purpose. We believe that the universe is here for a purpose. We believe that each one of us has a purpose." And the way I summed it up to my friends is that I said "Crustaceans, lizards and baboons do not dream."

Psalm 126, which we just read together: *When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion that we are like those who dream.* Dreams are fascinating. I was at a lacrosse game the other day and some of us parents of kids from our church who are on the lacrosse team were talking and somehow we got off on the subject of dreams. We started sharing some of the common dreams that we have repeatedly through our lives. You know, I always have a dream that I'm back in college and it's the day of a test, and I wake up after the test has begun, and I scramble out and I can't find the room where the test was supposed to be and I didn't study the right stuff, and some people nodded and other people shared dreams that they have. We all nodded. One woman said, "I recurrently have a dream where all of my teeth are falling out of my mouth." And I said "That's just plain weird." We have dreams and it's sort of the working out of emotional quirkiness in our head during the night. In the Bible is the sense that God speaks through dreams. We can maybe get a glimpse of this. We have dreams in our world and what they mean to us. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1963 stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and said "I have a dream" and it wasn't just his dream, it was God's dream, it was the American dream of how people ought to be, of how God wants us to be.

That same year when I was 8 years old in 1963, my parents took me to New York City. I don't remember a lot about that trip but I remember they took me to the United Nations building. I remember my heart being very excited by this. I thought this is the hope of humanity. There was so much tension in the world, I thought if people just could come together and talk about it. If people could just come together and talk and work out their problems, then there could be peace in the world. You see, I had a dream of peace. In the Bible, God speaks to people through dreams. I think God speaks to us through our dreams of things like our teeth falling out of our head, that there's some stuff that we need to work on. At times, God speaks to us in other kinds of dreams. I've told some of you before about a very pivotal dream that I had when I was in college, and I can't explain this. I was not a church person, I didn't believe in God, I wasn't interested in God, I wasn't interested in church, and I had some friends who kept nagging me, inviting me to go and I kept not going. Finally I went and that wasn't enough for them. Church people are like this. You give them what they want, you go to church, and it's not enough. They want more. They wanted me to go to a Bible study, and I felt like saying, "You should be glad I'm here at all. I'm not going to a Bible study. But that night I fell asleep and I had a very palpable dream, indeed, that awakened me at about 3 in the morning. In this dream, Jesus was before me. I don't know how I knew what Jesus looked like. I guess I'd seen his picture in the Sunday School book sometime or something. And Jesus spoke to me and said simply two words *Follow me.* Follow me, just a dream.

In Bible times, God spoke to people in dreams, and what God did in those dreams in the Bible is God told what God was about to do. God revealed God's future. And if you think about it, if we could have...you see, when Lazarus is back at that meal, it's like there's some wrinkle in time where the future has been dovetailed back into the present. Instead of Jesus saying, "Trust me, there will be a resurrection one day," what Jesus did is he raised one guy up, one friend named Lazarus so that people could see him alive and say, "It's real. We can trust in God's future." That is why Mary loves with such abandon and loves Jesus so lavishly. This is why Paul can write what he writes when he is in a dark, hard, cold prison cell in Rome, but yet, he can write with such a vibrant joy. It's because he knows God's future. He trusts in God's future.

You know, Easter is coming and Easter is the season when we think about the future. It often is a kind of sunny holiday, we dress up and wear pretty clothes and we deck the halls with flowers, but for many people Easter is a sad time, isn't it? Because we think about somebody that we loved and lost them. Maybe it's somebody who died in the past year. Maybe it's somebody who died 27 years ago and we've never really gotten over it. There's still that hole that nags, hurts. But we believe in God's future, that this life is not all there is. You see, that's what I tried to say to my friends the other night who said, "How could any fool believe in God after Darwin?" I told them a lot of stuff and they didn't seem interested in much but the one thing that seemed to capture their attention was this. I said, "In my work I spend time with people who are dying, and dying people are very interesting." They can be very noble. They can be very expansive in spirit. They express love and tenderness in remarkable ways. And their families can be remarkable. But to me, what's most remarkable about dying people, and I've been with dying people who are great believers, I've been with dying people who don't care much about God at all.

When people are dying, they do not look back on their lives and say, "It was enough, that's all there is, it was enough." And when people love someone who dies before them, after they have breathed their last, they don't say, "It was enough, it was plenty really because life is all there is." No, there's something in us that yearns for something beyond. We can't let it go. We loved someone and they died and we say things like "I can't imagine that he's really gone." "It doesn't seem possible that she is not here anymore" and we do things like we go to cemeteries and we lay flowers on a grave and we even, when nobody's looking, speak to one that we've loved and we've lost. There's something in us that yearns for something beyond, and I do not believe this is something that has evolved. I said this to my friends the other night - they're all bookworms - I said "I'm sure you have read and like Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and they all nodded and said, "Oh yes, that's one of our favorite books. She has a fascinating passage in there where she says "So much of our lives we can explain by evolution but the one thing that is inexplicable by evolution is this, and that is our feelings about death." Everything that evolves feels good. Everything that evolves is all about success. Everything that evolves is all about the fittest and getting ahead, but we have this curious thing that we find in our soul when we think about death. We feel fearful. We feel anxious, kind of brooding. We don't want it to come. It creates an ache. And we love someone and they die but we never just say "Oh, it was enough." It breaks our heart and gloom comes over us. We want something more. Annie Dillard says, "These feelings are so painful they cannot have evolved because they're so difficult for us." She says they must have been planted there by the one who made us so that we would yearn for

something more, so we wouldn't just settle for this life. It's a future. Faith dreams of a future. Faith trusts in God's future.

What you and I need really is more dreaming. I was thinking about dreams and I thought about that other song that came out of the 1960s. It's from the musical called the *Man of La Mancha* and the great song is *The Impossible Dream*. Do you remember this? I got in the shower yesterday morning and I practiced singing *The Impossible Dream* for you. And it didn't sound so good so I decided not to do that. It's a great song – go home and Google it – if you're young you may not know it – Robert Goulet singing *The Impossible Dream* – "to dream the impossible dream, to fight the unbeatable foe." It's a great song about courage. It's a great song about causes. It's a great song about life having meaning because of our great dreams. You know what's striking about it is that in the year 2010 there are no songs about impossible dreams anymore. Our songs now are all about being cool. Our songs now are all about – well, what are they about? They're cynical, they're bitter. We've forgotten how to dream. We've become like the crustaceans, the lizards and the baboons. They live to eat. They live to survive. That's the only reason that they're here. They do not dream. But God placed us here to dream. God planted something in our soul that no matter how much our society forgets to dream, when we overhear a good dream, it sparks something in our soul and we say "Somewhere in the dim recesses of humanity back there somewhere I remember that. I remember what it is to dream of peace among the nations, to dream of us being the kinds of people that God wants us to be, to dream of being good, dream of being courageous, dream of having hope, dream the kind of dream that trusts in God's future and lives into it."

There's a dream for you. Imagine, and it's impossible, but with God, nothing is impossible. Imagine this, you're not this way now but someday you become like Mary. Mary saw Jesus and she got it and she loved him, and she wanted to praise him. She wanted to thank him. And she didn't reach in her pocket and say "Oh, here's some spare change I don't really need. I'll give that to Jesus." Or "Here's something I kind of like but I don't really need it that much. I'll give that to Jesus." But she looked at what was most precious. She looked at what other people thought she would be crazy to do without, and without blinking an eye, she did not notice the door slamming behind her. She poured it out on Jesus, so great was her love. So lavish was her adoration. So deep was her trust in his future, in his goodness, in his love.

To dream the impossible dream, the dead eating with us once again. It's God's future, it's God's future. We can trust, we can trust, we can believe. We're not crustaceans, we're not lizards. We're God's children who made us to love, made us to trust. He made us to believe.

Amen.