

# Life from Death

John 11:1-44

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Let me state right off that Lazarus is not a zombie.

I feel it's imperative to declare that because zombies are ubiquitous in our popular culture these days. "The Walking Dead" is one of the most popular television shows. Every year there are new zombie movies. *28 Days Later* was frightening, *Shaun of the Dead* was funny, and *Warm Bodies* was a cute zombie romance. A Miami Herald article from 2012 had this interesting thought:

I keep wondering what anthropologists, digging through the remnants of our society, will make of us, a thousand years from now. Judging by the content of our most popular books, movies and TV programs, we'll look like a culture much more obsessed with vampires and zombies, with the occasional werewolf outlier, than, say, religion or philosophy or science.

Read more here: <http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/06/04/2832770/fear-anxiety-drive-zombie-craze.html#storylink=cpy>

If you've been to a Barnes and Noble recently then you might have been as shocked as I was when I wandered into the teen section and noticed an entire twelve foot or so span of shelves labeled "Teen Paranormal Romance."

Why the craze? Why does living death capture our imaginations?  
Anxiety may be the answer.

Google "zombies" and "anxiety" and you'll discover a host of articles by scholars and critics on the meaning of the recent zombie craze. Here's an example, from the same Miami Herald article:

Elizabeth Bird, a professor of anthropology at the University of South Florida, sees these reanimated corpses plodding through pop culture as surrogates for the pervasive fears that nag at modern life: pandemic diseases, nuclear destruction, environmental collapse, "the idea that we're consuming ourselves. If the world comes to an end, it will be because we destroyed ourselves."

Now, many have pointed out that this recent zombie craze came after the attacks of September 11, 2001 and gained in intensity after Hurricane Katrina. Others have pointed to new technologies and the anxieties that arise from those. Still others have claimed that the

craze is reflective of how overwhelmed we feel with all the information coming at us and all the tasks we must accomplish in our work and personal lives. Zombie stories can also be critiques of consumer capitalism or of our fear of immigrants and outsiders. Universities have begun offering courses with titles such as “Zombies: Social Anxiety & Pop Culture.”

So, the recent craze is reflective of the heightened fears and anxieties of the age in which we live. Of course, you don't have to be a fan of “The Walking Dead” or *World War Z* to realize that our current American culture is bound by fears and anxieties. A recent issue of *The Atlantic* featured the long article “Surviving Anxiety.” It was written by the magazine's editor, Scott Stossel, who told stories of the debilitating anxiety disorders he has struggled with since childhood. The article states at the beginning that “debilitating anxiety is the most common form of mental illness, afflicting one in four people at some point in their lives.” And that's just the “debilitating” kind. Far more than one fourth of Americans experience milder forms of anxiety.

One reason zombies are so popular in this current anxious age is that they remind us that we can live in ways that rob us of our full humanity. We can become living dead, so consumed by fear and anxiety that life loses its beauty, its joy, its purpose.

And, so, the story of Lazarus is not a zombie story. It's quite the opposite. It isn't about death robbing us of life. It is about life defeating death.

The author of the Gospel of John has been telling us all of these stories about Jesus because he believes that Jesus reveals the purposes of God. And those purposes include casting light into darkness, proclaiming truth in the midst of falsehood, and demonstrating love in an environment of hate. Again and again the stories have emphasized these themes, and most importantly the claim that God's purposes are life-giving. Jesus' revelation of God's power and glory then reaches a climax with this incredible story--Lazarus raised from the grave. It should now be abundantly clear that God intends to create life where there is death.

The story of Lazarus is a non-zombie story. It's a life story. And not even an after-life story.

Martha believes that her brother will rise again at the end of time, but Jesus shows her differently. Resurrection is not a future hope that God will create new life; it is a present reality. We can experience the new life of God now. We can rise again now.

Another way to talk about this is contained within the story itself. When Lazarus comes forth from the tomb, he must be unbound in order to be free.

So, what are the things that bind you? What's holding you back? Are you experiencing a form of death that steals the fullness of life from you?

My friend Tripp Fuller is a UCC minister in southern California. When we get together, we drink beer or wine, occasionally we smoke cigars, and we always discuss the intricacies of philosophy and theology. We nerd out on the church.

It was Tripp's article entitled “Zombies Are Among Us” which gave me the idea for today's sermon.

One day, while he was teaching his youth group about the effects of sin, one of the youth exclaimed, “This sounds like zombies.” That inspiration led to an entire series of lessons in which his youth group explored the questions “Where in your life does your zombie come out? Who gets hurt from your living dead?”

The youth then created a series of YouTube videos in which they answered these questions through confession. Here’s an example on the confession one group gave:

Zombies disregard the well-being of themselves and others to get their one desire; that’s why it’s easy for me to put down other people when they aren’t around. Looking cool to those present is more important than being respectful to those who aren’t. I’m a zombie.

This is an example of the church helping us to recognize the truth about ourselves. That begins the healing.

In his new book *Approaching the End*, theologian Stanley Hauerwas wrote, “The church cannot make the difficulty of reality less difficult.” He continues, “We are bodily creatures whose bodies make life rich and vital, but embodiment also means we are destined to endure pain, illness, and death.” Our Christian faith must meet the “challenge [of] how to be human in a world of cruelty.”

Scott Stossel’s article on anxiety in *The Atlantic* was surprising because of how it ended. Though he continues to treat his anxiety with medication and therapy, he writes, “I’ve come to understand that my own nervous disposition is perhaps an essential part of my being—and not just in ways that are bad.” He has embraced his illness as an important part of his identity and as one of the sources of his professional success.

He concludes with

the insight that in weakness and shamefulness is also the potential for transcendence, heroism, or redemption. My anxiety remains an unhealed wound that, at times, holds me back and fills me with shame—but it may also be, at the same time, a source of strength and a bestower of certain blessings.

We humans are anxious and afraid, and for good reason. In the midst of that hurt Jesus proclaims the good news that God is turning death into life. God is freeing us from what has bound us. God is empowering us to become our true, authentic, and best selves. We can rise again now.

We aren’t told what Lazarus thought when he walked out of that tomb. What do you think his reaction was?

The playwright Eugene O’Neil imagined it this way. After emerging from the grave, Lazarus is asked what it’s like on the other side. He then laughs, and laughing he says,

There is no death, really. There is only life. There is only God. There is only incredible joy. Death is not the way it appears from this side. Death is not an abyss into which we go into chaos. It is, rather, a portal through which we move into everlasting life. The one that meets us there is the same generosity that gave us our lives in the beginning, the one who gave us our birth. Not because we deserved it but because that generous one wanted us to be and therefore there is nothing to fear. The grave is as empty as a doorway is empty. . . . There is only life.