

What Will Convince You?

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text is from the Gospel reading, **“No, father Abraham,” the rich man said, “but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.” Abraham said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”** Here ends our text.

There was a rich man - who clothed himself in Armani suits, silk shirts, and alligator boots. Normally he drove his Mercedes or Porsche to the office, but today he drove his Hummer. He had his two prize winning retrievers in the back and wanted to show them off to his executives. He crossed the street from the parking garage and walked past the fountains outside his building, the building which he owned and where he operated his business. With one hand he held the leash for his dogs and with the other he carried a tray of fine meats and caviar left over from last night's dinner party. But as he started up the granite steps his dogs pulled him off to the right. There among the shadows of the building laid a man in ragged clothing. The retrievers were sniffing him and lapping at his face. The rich man had seen this man before, but now he got a closer look. The beggar wore an old work shirt with a name tag above the pocket. It read “Lazarus.” The tops of his arms and the side of his face were seeping with open sores. The rich man grimaced at this repulsive sight. Not wanting his dogs to get infected, he yanked them back and nearly dropped his platter. Lazarus looked up and wet his cracked lips as he looked at that platter. It had been so long since he had been filled up. He longed for just a bite, *just a taste on his tongue*, for he was in agony in his hunger. But the rich man had no *mercy* on Lazarus. He whistled his dogs under control and headed for the lobby. In the elevator he punched the button for the tenth floor. He pulled two slabs of meat from the platter and threw one to each dog. He patted their heads as they gulped it down and said, “Good boys.” From the window of his corner office the rich man looked out over the city. He *remembered* his encounter with the beggar, Lazarus, below. “I’m glad I’m not destitute like that guy,” he thought. “I’ve made something of myself.” He loved being rich.

Shortly thereafter the poor man Lazarus died. His passing went unnoticed. No one really knew his full name. No one on earth that is. But God knew his name. Lazarus was carried by the angels to the side of Abraham in heaven.

The rich man also died and was buried. He had a grand funeral procession, a long line of luxury cars with flags on the hood. He had the largest memorial stone in the cemetery with his full name chiseled in gothic letters. His name escapes me now. God didn’t know it either.

In hell the man was in torment. He looked up and saw Abraham far away. He remembered hearing about Abraham from his Sunday school days, or maybe it was from when he made his appearance in church twice a year. To his surprise, there was that beggar Lazarus at Abraham’s side. Thinking again only of himself, the man called to Abraham for Lazarus to do his bidding. “Have *mercy* on *me*. Send Lazarus into this place of torment. Have him dip the tip of his finger in water that he may cool my tongue. I long for *just a taste on my tongue* for I am in agony in this fire.”

But Abraham replied, “Son, *remember* that in your life you received your good things from God and Lazarus likewise bad things. God was merciful to you, but you spurned his mercy. You weren’t merciful to Lazarus. But now he’s comforted here, and you’re in great pain. Besides, in between you and us, God has established a great chasm so that those who desire to cross over from here to you aren’t able. Neither may they cross over from there to us.”

Then for the first time the man thought of someone other than himself. He thought of his family. He said, “I beg you father Abraham that you send Lazarus to my family. I have a brother, a wife, and two children. Send Lazarus to warn them so that they too don’t come to this place of torment.”

But Abraham said, “They have the Bible and that pastor. Let them hear him.”

“No, father Abraham. They won’t listen to him. But if someone comes from the dead to warn them, they’d repent. They’d change their mind.”

But Abraham said to the man, “*If they don’t hear the ones who preach God’s Word, neither will they be convinced if someone arose from the dead.*”

Do you think that’s true? If someone wasn’t convinced by God’s Word, would he be convinced if he saw a dead relative return from the grave? Would he be convinced by miraculous signs?

Some time ago, Jesus raised a man from the dead. His name was Lazarus. He’d been dead for four days. Some of the Jews saw it, went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, and told them what Jesus had done. And they said, “What are we going to do now? This guy is raising people from the dead! He’s doing miraculous signs. Pretty soon everyone will believe in him. Then we’ll lose our high positions, our long flowing robes, and our prestige.” *They* didn’t repent when someone arose from the dead. Neither did they hear Jesus’ words. Instead, they plotted for a way to kill Jesus and Lazarus too.

16th Sunday After Pentecost - September 25, 2022

A short time later, these unbelieving Jews got their wish. Jesus himself died on the cross, but three days later he arose from the dead. Jesus could have marched into Jerusalem, right up to the temple, and showed himself to these men. But he didn't. If they didn't hear his word, neither would they be convinced if he arose from the dead. They'd only try another assassination.

Herod had wanted Jesus to perform a miracle. But Jesus wouldn't do it. Herod had the preaching of John the Baptist whom he beheaded. Let him hear him. A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign.

But Jesus did show himself to his disciples and those who believed his word. On Easter Sunday, two disciples were walking along the road when Jesus came and walked with them, but they didn't recognize him. They were troubled by all the events that had happened in the last three days. Jesus could have immediately revealed himself to them, risen from the dead. But instead, he began with Moses and the Prophets and spoke to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. Jesus comforted them with His Word. Only later did Jesus show himself to them as their risen Lord.

The disciple Thomas wouldn't believe the word of the disciples but said, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails . . . I will never believe." After Jesus appeared to Thomas, he kindly rebuked him, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Blessed are those who have not seen someone risen from the dead, but who believed on the word of the disciples.

Jesus spent forty days showing himself to his followers. Sometimes to small groups. At one time to 500 brothers at the same time. But he never went public. There were no appearances to the crowds in the temple. No mass conversions for seeing a living dead man. Actually, those came after Jesus ascended to heaven, after the proof was gone. But on Pentecost the Holy Spirit worked through the preaching of the disciples so that everyone could hear them speak in their own language. That day 3000 received the Word of God and were baptized.

That's how God chose to work. *He brought people to repentance, not through miraculous signs and fantastic appearances from the dead, but through his Word.*

Today, we live in an age of sensory stimulation don't we. HDTV, special effects, stereophonic sound and lights. We look for thrills on the internet and reality shows. We want to be wowed. What's the next model, what's the next version, what's the next gadget, what's the next technology that will get our attention. We seek the glamorous. We push that button to the top floor but avoid the Word of the living God like we avoid a sore ridden beggar cast in the shadows.

Have you ever thought like that rich man? You hear the Word of God preached week after week. It seems a little dull. What I need is something fantastic. If I could just see God, see Jesus risen from the dead. If I could just see a miracle, that would clinch it for me. Show me that He's there. Prove to me that He's there. Then I'd really change. Then I'd know for sure.

Or maybe you've thought that people won't believe just by hearing God's Word. We need to make it more appealing, less offensive. Less talk about how we fail everyday like that rich man, thinking only of ourselves and having no mercy on others. Less talk about how we're really like that beggar Lazarus with nothing to offer God. Less talk about that gruesome sight on the cross, that man with blood seeping from his wounds on his hands and face. What we need is more talk about how we can be successful in this life. How we can make something of ourselves. More might come to church, but would they believe? Would they repent?

Sometimes we don't trust the Word of God to do its work. But "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."

A child who is cared for day after day by his parents knows that they love him. When they speak to him, he believes them. They don't have to do any miracles to convince him. And neither does God need to perform any miracles to convince you. Day after day he cares for you. He gave his life for you. You know that he loves you. So when he speaks to you in his Word, you believe it. His Word brings you to repentance: sorrow over your sin and faith that He forgives you.

The only *visible* things God will give you with his Word are ordinary water, a sip of wine, and a morsel of bread. It's not enough to feed a beggar, but it's enough to save a beggar. A sinful but forgiven beggar just like you.

That's how God chooses to work.

GOD BRINGS YOU TO REPENTANCE, NOT THROUGH MIRACULOUS SIGNS AND FANTASTIC APPEARANCES, BUT SIMPLY THROUGH HIS WORD.

We have Moses and the prophets and the apostles and pastors who preach God's Word. Let us hear them. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.