

## DEAD MAN WALKING

John 11:17, 38-44

March 14, 2010

Around this time last year you might remember that our Dallas opera co-hosted a gala event with the Ft. Worth opera exploring the impact that the arts can make on social change and social justice. (Uh, oh—I said the phrase social justice. If I see any of you run out of here, I'll know you've been listening to a certain talk show host!)

The event featured Sister Helen Prejean, the author of the autobiographical book Dead Man Walking, which was later made into a movie starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn. The story line follows the spiritual relationship that developed between Sister Helen and death-row inmate Matthew Poncelet in the months before his death.

I was introduced to the phrase “dead man walking” with that movie, not having much of an education in prison lingo before. That phrase is announced when a man sitting on death row makes his last walk down the halls before he is executed—for all intents and purposes he is already dead.

It is such a hopeless phrase—dead-man walking.

It is also the place we find ourselves on our Lenten crosswalk this week--getting ever closer to the climax of our Christian story. The threat to Jesus' life was becoming more evident with each passing day, and the disciples were doing everything they could to keep him from being “dead man walking.”

The events that led up to our reading today from John's gospel began earlier in the book, in Chapter 10, where we hear that the Pharisees and religious leaders had just about reached the end of their patience with Jesus who continued to challenge everything they stood for. There was a

particularly ugly incident when he was almost stoned because some felt his teaching was blasphemous.

After this ugly exchange, Jesus and his disciples left the area near Jerusalem by crossing back over the river Jordan in order to put some distance between him and his enemies. It was there that Jesus received the word that his best friend, Lazarus, was seriously ill, terminally ill.

Most of us, when we hear such news, will be spurred into action—phone calls for flights made, meetings rescheduled. When we get a call that a death might be imminent, we get a move on it so we won't be late to say our last words, or, in Jesus' case, to perhaps heal his friend.

But Jesus—Jesus did seem to do nothing. Initially, the disciples assumed Jesus' in-action was because he was afraid for his own safety, since Lazarus' hometown of Bethany was so close to Jerusalem and the place where those who were trying to kill him were known to hang out.

But then, two days after the news came to him, he left to make his journey to Bethany—cautioned by the alarmed disciples who felt he was walking into danger.

When he finally arrived, Martha, one of Lazarus' sisters, met him at the door and shouted at Jesus, "You're too late!" Then Mary, the other of Lazarus' sisters, led him to the graveside and quietly, tearfully, admonished Jesus, "You're too late!"

The truth is, Jesus was four days too late—and that was hugely significant. The funeral had already happened. The mourners who were still there were getting ready to pack up and go home.

According to Jewish death beliefs at the time, many people thought that the soul lingered three days after death. By the fourth day, the soul has left the earthly realm having traveled to its ultimate destination for good.

Mary and Martha, who had no doubt seen Jesus heal with a touch before, had hoped beyond all hope that he would get there before it was too late to heal Lazarus. After their beloved brother had died, perhaps they had hoped Jesus would get there sometime during the three days waiting period, working his miraculous gifts to call Lazarus back into his body.

But Jesus arrived on the fourth day—too late for Mary and Martha to have any hope.

That phrase “too late” is almost as dire as the phrase “dead-man walking.” No one wants to be “too late” for anything.

Today is a day that we may be saying, “you’re too late” to people after service. It seems that there are always one or two that don’t remember to change their clocks for Daylights Savings Time. I wouldn’t be surprised if, as we leave worship today we’ll run into a few people who are just arriving, and we’ll have to say, “You’re too late.”

Friends of the late comedian, George Burns, always kidded him about his singing, or whatever it could be called. Burns, a master of self-deprecating humor, decided to take advantage of this and insure his voice for a million dollars. He thought it would be a wonderful publicity stunt.

"I was so excited," said Burns, "I couldn't wait to rush down to the insurance company. I took a cassette and a tape recorder with me so the insurance man could hear my voice. It was one of my best numbers -- a syncopated version of Yankee Doodle Blues with a yodeling finish. The insurance man listened patiently to the whole thing, then he just looked at me and said, 'Mr. Burns, it's too late. You should have come to us before you had the accident.'" *Bits & Pieces*, March 3, 1994, p. 7 from

[www.sermonillustrations.com/l/late](http://www.sermonillustrations.com/l/late).

And there are other times when it's not a good thing to hear the words, "I'm sorry, you're too late"--Job interviews; meetings with important clients; your own wedding.

Seriously folks, I performed a wedding one time in which the bride was an hour and a half late. The ceremony was held at a park on top of one of our mountains around Tucson, and so as the time for the service came and went, we began to get worried that something had happened to the bride and her bridesmaids on the curvy roads up to the forested peak where the guests sat anxiously waiting. Cell phone coverage was spotty up there, and the groom had to drive down the mountain to make contact.

Finally, the hummer limo drove up with the girls, and they piled out of the car, looking absolutely beautiful with their hair and make up done. They should have looked beautiful, because the bride blamed the hair stylist for causing them to be an hour and a half late.

As one of the ministers officiating the wedding, I should have said, "I'm sorry, you're too late." But we went ahead with the ceremony. I'm sure it won't surprise you to learn the couple is no longer married. It's not good to be late to your own wedding.

The thing of it is, I am amazed at how many people live their lives like it is too late for them. They move heavily through their days, looking for all intents and purposes that the executioner has just announced "Dead Man or Dead Woman Walking" just for them.

I've encountered that with men and women who have lost their jobs and who face the huge wall of age-discrimination in their job search. "It's too late for me," and they give up trying.

I've encountered that with those who are facing impending birthdays where they will reach the age their mother and father were when they died. "It's too late for me," and they quit working out or eating healthily.

I've encountered that with those are who fighting peer pressure in high school, who are bullied by text or tweet or my space slander. "It's too late for me," and they tragically commit suicide.

I've encountered that with men and women who, for whatever reason, have not yet found the right person to marry, and they cry out "It's too late for me," and they hide in their work or their homes.

I've encountered that with our seniors in nursing homes who really are facing a time limit, sometimes in pain, and they want to die now. "It's too late for me to do anything of value anymore."

It's with that type of agony in their hearts that Mary and Martha greet their family friend—"You're too late, Jesus."

But, people of faith, hear the good news of our text today.

It's never too late when Jesus is in our lives!

Didn't you hear how our text ends today? Jesus goes to the tomb, and much to the chagrin of the sisters, he asks the mourners to move the stone away from the entrance. "Lord, it's been four days—it's going to stink in there!" Martha cautions.

But the rank stench of defeat and despair and dead-ends does not detour Jesus. He lifts up a brief prayer and shouts, "Lazarus, come out."

And then there really was a Dead Man Walking, and Jesus turns that phrase on its heels.

In Jesus' realm, nothing is hopeless.

In Jesus' realm, nothing is irrevocably destroyed.

In Jesus' realm there is no dead end, no "too late," no end of the world as we know it.

Perhaps the apostle Paul says it best in one of my most favorite verses of the Bible—from II Corinthians 4 when he writes, "we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed."

Dead Man Walking becomes a shout of hope, the clarion call of Christ. It becomes not an announcement of finality, the proclamation of doom and gloom, but an invitation to all who feel like they've hit a dead end to continue to live in the promise of new life.

Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, and continues to reach out to us in the tomb-like places we have buried ourselves by shouting our names and telling us to unbind ourselves from our grave clothes.

Jesus faced humanity's greatest fear, our greatest unknown, face to face. Because let's face it—we're all dead men and women walking! We're all going to end up in the same place someday.

But someone once said what death did to Jesus is nothing compared to what Jesus did to death.