

If you are an avid reader, then most likely you would agree that there are certain criteria that must be met for a book to be considered the greatest of all time. At the very least it must feature an unforgettable story and be told by an incredibly gifted author. At the top of the list for academics, and your average everyday reader, you might find:

*Ulysses*, by James Joyce, which is about the passage of a man through Dublin on an ordinary day in 1904. *Don Quixote*, by Miguel de Cervantes, contains the story of a retired man who becomes obsessed with chivalry. *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald, is a chronicle of the Roaring 1920s. And *Moby Dick*, by Herman Melville, features the famous tale of Captain Ahab and his pursuit of a white whale.

Yes, you might say that these are great books, all of them. The top five, according to a website called “The Greatest Books,” which has created a master list out of 122 other best-books lists. But setting greatness aside, what would you deem to be the most *influential* book of all time? Which story do you believe has had the greatest impact on human life?

The *Yale Alumni Magazine* published a list of books that have changed people’s lives, and you might be surprised by what they found. A Yale professor of military and naval history chose *Winnie-the-Pooh*, “because each of the animals has a distinctive personality.” He has found it to be an excellent guide for navigating life, classrooms, and department meetings.

A professor of World Christianity says that his life was changed by Helen Keller’s autobiography, *The Story of My Life*. The professor grew up in Africa and discovered her book in a trash dump. He remembers that he read it with avid attention to “her testimony about knowledge as power.”

The director of the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History realized one day that his life was changed by Jane Werner Watson’s *Giant Golden Book of*

*Dinosaurs and Other Prehistoric Reptiles*, published in 1960. Even if the science is now most certainly outdated, he says, the illustrations in the book “remain just as powerful as when they ignited in me a passion to understand the natural world.”

Ok, so *Winnie-the-Pooh*. Helen Keller’s autobiography, and a giant picture book of dinosaurs. These are books that have changed people’s lives. And yet, as we explore today’s scripture readings, one could say that we could add John’s Gospel to this list, because it is an actual book found alongside other books in the Bible. In fact, John 3:16 alone, the verse that the reformer Martin Luther called “the gospel in a nutshell,” has transformed the lives of countless thousands of people.

And, of course, this morning’s narrative tells the story of death, resurrection and belief — a story that has generated faith in the lives of millions. John’s account of Jesus, Martha and Lazarus — an account that does not appear in any of the other gospels — has all the drama of the world’s greatest and most influential of books. And most of us know the story well!

John tells us that “a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, which was the village of Mary and her sister Martha.” We can imagine Lazarus and his two sisters as vivid literary characters, as distinctive as Pooh, Piglet and Eeyore. In fact, you might think of Lazarus as Pooh, friendly and spirit filled. Of course, Mary can be seen as Piglet, intelligent but timid. And Martha is Eeyore, sardonic and pessimistic.

Eeyore and Piglet (Martha and Mary) send a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” They knew that Jesus loved upbeat and cheerful Lazarus, and they assumed that he would rush to his side. But Jesus brushed their message aside, saying, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory.” And he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. While he was there, Lazarus died.

Eventually, Jesus travels to Bethany and finds that Lazarus had been lying dead in a tomb for four days. Martha leaves her house to meet Jesus in full Eeyore mode — glum and pessimistic. She probably said something like, “It’s all for naught.” And we can easily imagine her with hands on her hips as she solemnly proclaims, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” But since Martha also had a strong faith in Jesus, she goes on to say, “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”

Jesus responds to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha replies, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” But Jesus was determined to change her thinking about new life, so he announces, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

What a crisis for Martha, who like Eeyore may have been in the habit of saying, “Wish I could say yes, but I can’t.” Martha could see the facts around her: Lazarus was dead, his body was rotting in a tomb, and he wasn’t scheduled to rise until the resurrection on the last day. But now Jesus was saying, “I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?”

“Wish I could say yes,” she thought to herself. But instead of agreeing completely, she said, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” And then she goes home and reports to her sister that Jesus was calling for her.

Mary upon hearing the news jumps up and runs out to see Jesus, like Piglet feeling small and helpless in a crisis situation. And when Mary comes to Jesus and sees him, she kneels at his feet and says, “Lord, it is hard to be brave when you’re only a very small animal” ... actually what she says is “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Word for word, she makes the same statement as her sister, but the emotion in her statement must have been different, because when

Jesus saw her weeping, he was disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. In fact, upon seeing Mary's tears he is now moved by her sadness, he's touched by her heartache, and he begins to feel something deep in his gut.

And then, suddenly, Jesus is crying. In public. The Son of God, the Savior of the world, is crying. Which in the King's James translation is the shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus Wept!" And who could blame him? Lazarus was his friendly, thoughtful, and spirit-filled friend. And now he was dead.

While he mourns his friend's passing Jesus walks to the cave that served as the tomb of Lazarus and sees that it had a stone lying against it. "Take away the stone," Jesus commands of those gathered at the graveside. Causing Martha to reply, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." While at the same time Martha may have been thinking to herself, "It'll never work."

But Jesus, perhaps reading her mind answers, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" After all, as we witness through the eyewitness testimonies of his earthly ministry, for Jesus, the key is *believing* — faith is the attitude that changes your life. And what makes the gospel of John such a life-changing book is that it is a story about the power of belief.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." "Very truly, I tell you," said Jesus, "anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life" "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty"

Anyone who *believes* will have eternal life. Anyone who *believes* has passed from death to life. Whoever *believes* in Jesus will never be hungry or thirsty. That's the power of belief ... of faith ... of trust.

So, they take away the stone. Jesus lifts up a prayer, giving thanks that God has heard him. But, as the narrative informs us, he was really praying that for the sake of the crowd, “so that they may believe.” Then Jesus cries out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”

Now, imagine if the Lord had not specifically used his friends’ name at that time, perhaps all those buried in their graves in that cemetery would have been raised also. And yet, Lazarus comes out of his tomb, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus says to the mourners, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Upon releasing him, they saw that Lazarus was alive and well — upbeat, cheerful, full of spirit. And when the people in the area saw what Jesus had done, they “believed in him.” Once again, we witness the power of belief. And later in the gospel of John, we learn that the chief priests were furious at Lazarus, “since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.”

Whenever we look at a list of great books, we might wonder about their purpose. *Ulysses* talks about a man in Dublin. Why do we need to hear about that? *The Great Gatsby* captures the spirit of the Roaring 1920s. But why was it written? And *Moby Dick*’s story of Captain Ahab and a white whale? Is it an adventure story or a whaling manual? What is its *purpose*?

No such question needs to be asked of the gospel of John. The book was written “so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” John changes our lives by inviting us to believe in Jesus, so that we may have life in his name: Life that is full of love and grace, received from Jesus and shared with others. Life that doesn’t fear judgment, because it has passed beyond death. Life that knows no spiritual

hunger, because Jesus is always offering us nourishment. Life that doesn't end at death but continues into eternal life.

The gospel of John is a book that can change your life, because it tells the story of Jesus overcoming death. So, today as we celebrate All Saints Sunday and honor the Saints who have gone before us in the faith, we recall God's promise of eternal life given to us on account of Christ. But let me ask you one question. Do you believe it? Amen.