

“A certain man, Lazarus, was ill.” For those of us who have been somewhat regular church attenders for a few years or more, as soon as we hear these words, we know the rest of the story. We know that this is the story about Lazarus, friend of Jesus and brother of Mary and Martha, who dies from an illness and after four days is raised by Jesus. Like many familiar stories in the Bible, it can be difficult to hear this story with a fresh perspective. It is difficult to be filled with suspense when Jesus tells the people to roll the stone away from the entrance to the tomb. It is difficult to be filled with awe and wonder when Jesus cries out “Lazarus, come out!” It is difficult to be surprised when Lazarus does in fact come out from the tomb still bound by the strips of cloth. In our familiarity with the story, we risk glossing over the details which might give us a new perspective or a deeper understanding of a truth that this story holds for us.

Our familiarity with the story can also lead us to forget that the characters in this story did not know how the events would unfold. We hear the hope and faith in the words of Martha but only after Jesus asks her if she believes that he is the resurrection and the life. Her initial reaction is anger at the delay in Jesus’ arrival and deep grief over their brother’s death. But even after professing her belief that Jesus is the Messiah, when Jesus commands the stone to be rolled away, Martha questions Jesus’ judgement when she informs him that there will certainly be a stench since Lazarus has been dead for four days. So imagine the shock, the awe, even the fear that the people must have felt when Lazarus came walking out of the tomb, still wrapped in cloth, out of the darkness of the grave and into the light of new life. This isn’t how the world works. Not then and not now. People who are dead stay dead. It is a fact of life.

I’ll let you in on a little secret. I have a really hard time believing stories like this one of Lazarus being raised from the dead. Maybe you do too. Someone who has died being brought back to life does not fit with either our lived experience or our scientific understanding of the basic biology of the human body. But, as I have said before, and this time I will quote a native American story teller “I don’t know if it happened this way, but I know the story is true.” In other words, whether or not we could go back in time and video tape the events of this story does not take away from the truths that this story

has to offer us. So whether or not you believe these events to be historical fact, or metaphorical or allegorical imagination, or you hold both possibilities in your heart at the same time, we can enter into the narrative and hear its truth for us this morning.

Our journey through lent is almost over. Next week is Palm Sunday followed by Holy Week during which we journey with Jesus in the darkest days and hours of his life. Two weeks from today we emerge from the tomb with Jesus once again as his resurrection offers hope in the possibility of new life when all seems hopeless. The tension between the hope of resurrection and the finality of death is palpable. Day after day, week after week, it can be a struggle to find hope in the midst of what feels like a society in which pessimism, skepticism, and judgement are the norm; when we are content to let people suffer either because we are afraid of what helping them might cost us in either money or safety, or because we don't agree with their lifestyle and the role it played in causing their suffering, or because we think that maybe they deserve to suffer because we disagree with the choices they made, or we simply think it doesn't impact our life, so why should we sacrifice anything to help make their lives better.

We allow ourselves to suffer in situations that are less than life-giving because finding new life seems impossible or we don't feel worthy of anything different.

When this type of thinking becomes acceptable and celebrated in society, we can easily feel defeated and hopeless. But I know that we yearn for resurrection and hope. In the words of preaching professor Veronica Miles "we yearn for ...the unbinding that releases us to dream beyond the boundaries and experience life anew."¹

This is what struck me about the Lazarus story this week – the act of unbinding of being set free. When Jesus raises Lazarus from death, this is the beginning of the miracle but not the end. Did you notice that what happens next? Lazarus comes out with his hands and feet (and probably the rest of him) still bound by strips of cloth. Unlike the resurrection of Jesus in which the cloths are left behind, Lazarus is still not

¹ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, vol. Year A, Volume 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 140.

completely free of that which binds him. But rather than Jesus doing the unbinding himself, he directs the people gathered to “unbind him, and let him go.”

As David Lose writes, “We are not only called to be witnesses of God’s action in our lives, but also to be changed by what we see and thereby invited into the ongoing reality of what God is doing. God does the miracle, but God also gives us a part to play as it unfolds in our life.”² If we were to dream beyond boundaries, recalling the words of Veronica Miles, what binding would we need to be released from to live into those dreams? What in our lives or in our societal life is acting like graveclothes, keeping us from fullness and wholeness of life? Are there times that you witness or experience God’s work in the world and yet something holds you or a community back from truly co-creating something life-giving and powerful with God’s help? The good news is that when we are bound, we can seek help from God to resurrect us from the tombs we are residing in and to our community to help us become free. And when we are the ones looking on, we are called into participating in the unbinding.

But his unbinding is not without difficulties and risks. Often the obstacles in our way seem insurmountable. Our fear of failure or the assumption that something is impossible, can keep us from even dreaming of the possibilities. We talk ourselves out of liberation all the time – “I’m not smart enough, it’s too difficult, it’s dangerous, it’s always been this way, what if people reject me?” But often these obstacles appear more ominous than they really are and we stay stuck in the mode of avoiding danger and pain instead of discerning a new path. I like to think that if I had been one the disciples with Jesus, that when he decides to return to Judea to raise Lazurus, that I would have been like Thomas, throwing caution to the wind, and proclaiming “Let us go too so that we may die with Jesus.” But more likely I would have been part of the group that said are you crazy? The opposition is trying to kill you! Let’s find something else to do that won’t put your (and our) lives in danger.

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/03/lent-5a-heartache-miracle-invitation/>

Liberation is threatening for those who don't want to change the status quo. We see this in the end of our story this morning when the Jewish opposition has had enough of Jesus. Fearful of repercussions by the Roman Empire, they decide the expedient thing to do is to kill Jesus. But we hear time and again throughout the Gospels that Jesus believed so strongly in the liberation people from old ways that were keeping the bound, that it was worth risking his life to give them new life.

So my prayer for all of us this morning is that we take seriously the power of resurrection and unbinding, even if we don't take the story literally. Borrowing from Professor Miles again, "resurrection confronts us as an urgent call, beckoning us to consider that those whom our world deems socially, physically, spiritually, and emotionally dead might live into a new reality." I pray that the love which seeks to unbind us and set us free from things that keep us from fullness of life will enliven us to unbind communities and individuals from the graveclothes of poverty, war, oppression, addiction, and apathy.

I will close with a blessing by Jan Richardson which is simply called "Lazarus Blessing"

The secret of this blessing is that it is written on the back of what binds you.

To read this blessing, you must take hold of the end of what confines you, must begin to tug at the edge of what wraps you round.

It may take long, and long for its length to fall away, for the words of this blessing to unwind in folds about your feet.

By then you will no longer need them.

By then this blessing will have pressed itself into your waking flesh, will have passed into your bones, will have traveled every vein until it comes to rest inside the chambers of your heart that beats to the rhythm of benediction and the cadence of release.³

³ "Lazarus Blessing" © Jan Richardson, <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2011/04/03/lent-5-learning-the-lazarus-blessing/>