

Sunday Morning Reflection

March 29, 2020 – Lent #5

Scripture Passage – [John 11:38-44](#)

The story of Lazarus' resurrection is, like so many other stories in the gospels, layered with a multitude of different meanings. There are so many angles from which we could approach this story. We could talk about the similarity between this passage and the woman at the well. In that context Jesus offered the woman "Living Water" and in this context it appears that Jesus offers Lazarus and all of us "Living Life", or life to the full. We could talk about how in many regards, this story is the climax of John's gospel and is intended to teach us that the resurrection is not just about our future lives, but like Lazarus, the resurrection is a "Living Life" that we live in every nano second of our lives. So many angles, so little time!

The angle that I would like explore with you this morning, is focused on the reality of hopelessness. A good place to launch this exploration, is with Mary and Martha's role in the story. In this story, Mary and Martha shatter all social conventions and confront, or dare I say condemn Jesus, because Jesus did not come immediately when the news of Lazarus' condition had reached him.

I understand how Mary and Martha felt. They had called for Jesus. He was down near the Jordan, where John had been baptizing. Close enough to get to Bethany. Really close if your dear friend is dying!

But Jesus doesn't seem too concerned. He lingers and almost "lolly-gags" near the Jordan. Then suddenly, all too suddenly, it is too late. Lazarus is dead. All human hope is lost. It is too late.

Have you ever been there? In that place where all human hope is lost? Too late to fix, too late to act, too late even to hope. It's just too late. Jesus knows that Lazarus is dead, he even tells his disciples this brutal truth. Only then does he decide to go to nearby Bethany.

John specifically tells us that Jesus arrives in Bethany on the fourth day. Why is this important? To know the day? In the Jewish world view, the fourth day is the most hopeless of days. In their world view, God can and

often does act on the third day. But on the fourth day, all is beyond hope. Jesus arrived on the most hopeless of days, the fourth day.

After being confronted by Mary, Jesus goes to the tomb where he is moved to tears and grief. And then, surrounded by a crowd of hopeless people, standing outside a hopeless hole, and on this, the most hopeless of all days, the fourth day, Jesus acts.

There are no incantations, just a simple appeal to the power of God and a simple command, "Lazarus, come out!" and Lazarus comes out.

Have you ever felt hopeless before? I know I have. Failed relationships, failed dreams, failed programs, failed attempts to fix life's problems. It is sometime around the proverbial fourth day, that I resign myself to failure, and I give up... allowing my heart to be filled with resentment. But this story reminds us that it is in the entombed darkness of hopelessness, that Jesus acts in liberating and healing ways. It is when we are deep in our holes of hopelessness, that Jesus commands, "Come out!"

The Old and New Testament do not promise that because of our faith, we will not suffer hardship, darkness, and even hopelessness. No such promise is given in scripture; even though the healthy, wealthy, and wise gospel proponents who flood our airwaves suggest otherwise. We are never guaranteed that our lives will be perfect. We will, and we have, experienced hardship, darkness, and hopelessness. But it is in the midst of our hardship, darkness, and hopelessness, that Jesus calls us to "Come out" and we can come out and walk in new life and new hope.

These are indeed very challenging times that we are living in and through. Hardship, darkness, hopelessness, and an abundance of fear seem to be the defining realities of our time. People are suffering from Covid19 infections, people are dying, people are losing their jobs, people are suffering from social isolation, and people are gripped by fear. We may not have reached the fourth day that will seem to be beyond hope, but it is not that hard to imagine that day coming.

However, for us as believers, it does not matter whether the fourth day that is beyond hope arrives, because for us there is always hope. Lazarus' resurrection reminds us that even in the midst of the most hopeless of times, Jesus can act in liberating and healing ways that set us free from

darkness and hopelessness. Jesus can and will call us to “Come out”, renewing and restoring our lives.

One element of this story that has always moved me, is what happens when Lazarus steps out from the tomb. Setting aside the fear that he will be rather rotten and shall we say ripe, Jesus instructs those who are present to help Lazarus by unwrapping his burial clothes. I can’t imagine that Jesus needed their help. If Jesus could raise Lazarus from the dead, then certainly he could have caused the strips of linen that encased his body to fall off! But no, that is not what happened. Lazarus steps out from the grave, still enslaved by the linens of death, and Jesus tells those gathered to help set him free.

Could it be that in this scene, Jesus is reminding us that in as much as we need Jesus to command us to “Come out” from our holes of hopelessness, we also need one another to help set us free. Could it be that full freedom from the bonds of hopelessness come in and through fellowship, the shared life of community, where in love we unwrap one another from the linens of hopelessness that bind us to death?

So, let me encourage you to embrace the hope that is shared in this story. Our faith does not insulate us from suffering, rather our faith sets us free from the hopelessness that is often associated with suffering, so that we can be free to serve God and others. And let me encourage you to help one another. Remove one another’s linens of death that bind us to hopelessness.

Response Activity:

Can you think of an area of your life where it is hard to think that anything good can happen - where things are going badly for you? Can you think of an area where you might say - as did Israel in the time of exile: "our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, we are cut off completely..."? Is there an area of your life where your hope is gone?

What do you want to do about this? Do you want to lock it up in a tomb and seal this away from Jesus? Are you worried that it stinks? OR are you

willing to have Jesus visit this area of your life? Are you willing to have Jesus invite you to “Come out” from your tomb of hopelessness?

If you want Jesus to visit this area of your life, then, in this moment of silence, invite Jesus to bring the power of resurrection life into your life. Imagine Jesus visiting this area and bringing it to life. Imagine your brothers and sisters helping remove the linens of death that bind you to hopelessness. Do this as we take a minute for silent prayer. (Minute silence)

Prayer: Let us be glad that Jesus is the lord of both the living and the dead. He is the resurrection and the life, those who believe in him, though they die, will live,
and everyone who lives and believes in him will never die. Amen