

*Fifth Sunday in Lent*

April 2, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint John. (John 11: 1-45)

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of the world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "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?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The raising of Lazarus. What do we bring to this story this morning? I am willing to bet that most of you here today have sat by the bed of someone who is ill, and felt helpless as you sat there. I bet just about everyone here has known someone who has died. And I would say at least a few, if not most, have at one time prayed, "Lord, help me." And, at another time, "If you'd only been here." Am I right?

We are Mary and Martha in this story, loving their brother, caring for him, and losing him to death. We are Mary and Martha. But today I would like to propose that we are Lazarus as well.

"But," you say, "Lazarus is dead." Yes, he is. And we are Lazarus. We experience death. Not just death that will happen to us all at the end of life, but death and loss that comes into life. We are all bound or buried or separated from life in many ways. From discovering that secret that breaks your heart to getting cut from the baseball team. To not being able to see or hear as well as we once did. To fear, that's a big one: fear of applying for that new job or speaking to that person I really need to speak with. To anger, that's another big one: anger and regret that we nurse and we feed. To an inability to fight an addiction or an unhealthy habit. So many ways that death holds us.

I want to invite you to try something. Pull out the paper bracelet that you received when you first came in. It's paper, so you can write on it with just about anything. I would like you to take a moment and think about how you are bound by the ways of death. What is your greatest fear, or anger, or loss? It might be something inside yourself. Don't just write your least favorite politico or the boyfriend you broke up with. What in your life feels like death? What holds you back from the joy of resurrection? Write down a word, or a symbol, or something, on the white side of your bracelet.

When you have written something, I invite you put the bracelet on, because we are bound by death. And you will notice that these things are not easy to get off.

Lazarus was dead. We get that. But Lazarus was also loved. Jesus walked into a whole community of grief. Mary and Martha loved their brother, and they were devastated by his death. They were surrounded by neighbors that came to care for them. And John tells us, right up front, that Jesus loves Lazarus.

Jesus makes that love concrete. Jesus showed that love for Lazarus in very real ways. First of all, Jesus comes back. He comes. Just before this, the authorities had tried to stone Jesus. They were looking to arrest him. He had slipped away, to be across the Jordan from it all. But now, for Lazarus, he comes back, because he loves him. Number two, Jesus lets those sisters vent at him. *"If you'd only been here."* And he doesn't say a word. He lets them speak their grief, because he loves them. Third, Jesus speaks deep truth to Martha. *"I am the resurrection and the life."* He speaks the truth because he loves her. And, fourth, Jesus weeps. Jesus gets involved in all the heartbreak of losing someone you love. This is no far-off savior speaking down from above. He is willing to risk danger, bear anger, speak the truth, and let his heart break.

We, too, know death. But we also know love. Whether it is families or friends or this community gathered, we know what it means to be loved. To be loved by Jesus. Jesus, the one who shows us who God is. We are loved by this one, who may sometimes feels distant, the one who feels far away and can't possibly make a difference. *"If you'd been here."* We are also loved by this one who comes close, no matter the cost. The one who weeps with us. The one who dies with us.

Lazarus is dead. And Lazarus is loved. Then, out of this love, newness comes. Lazarus is called forth. This is resurrection, a new thing happening. God, who loves deeply and who is resurrection and life, calls to him, *"Lazarus, come out!"* The dead man came out. And they lived happily ever after.

That's the way we want it to end, don't we? Good heavens, he was dead! And he's alive, and he walks out of the tomb. And Jesus says, *"Unbind him."* And it's all good. "The End." But it is not the end.

Have you ever wondered what happened next to Lazarus? Imagine Lazarus in his tomb. Did he hear a voice calling to him and the promise in that voice? Or was he dreaming? "Is it wishful thinking that life can happen to me, after all this time? And how can I do it? I'm tied up with strips of cloth? How do you walk?" Does he roll to get out of the tomb? Think of how much courage it takes to trust that voice, to trust the promise that it is going to be okay. And get up and do something about it.

It is not easy to break the bonds of death. We want to believe that it's going to be all good. It's going to be all beautiful and perfect for Lazarus. And just the way we dreamed it would be for us. But it wasn't like that for Lazarus.

He came out of the tomb uncertain, vulnerable, naked, smelly, and still bound hand and foot. The light hurts his eyes when they take the cloth away. And he has to figure out – “Now what?” For the rest of his life, he will always be, “that guy who was dead.” When he stops by the gas station, do people talk with him about baseball? Or is it all awkward and people saying, “What was it like?” “What did you see?” Or just looking away? New life wasn’t easy. It takes time to figure it out.

Notice your bracelets don’t magically pop off at this point in the sermon. You’re going to have to figure out how to get them off.

Lazarus was walking around, as a reminder that Jesus had power over death, which meant Jesus was dangerous. He was uncontrollable. He was powerful. And he was a threat to the nation and the empire. Just a little bit after this, the authorities decide that Jesus is to die, and so does Lazarus. New life has consequences.

The glory of this story is not that Jesus made it all better and they all lived happily ever after. Jesus doesn’t make things easy or comfortable. The glory of this story is that Jesus gave life. Life that was tearing down illusions and speaking the truth. Life that is loving and being loved, with all the vulnerability and risks that that entails. Life that is trusting someone beyond me that I can’t prove or explain. I can only experience and trust. Life is stepping out in faith in the direction of one who calls your name. Life is stepping into the circle of others who love you and are willing to unbind you and let you go.

We know death. We also know love. And out of love, life comes, newness comes.

We began this Lent five weeks ago in dust. “*Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.*” We know death.

In the next two weeks, we will hear the story of love. Love that is vulnerable, and seems powerless and insignificant in the face of hatred and death. But love is the only voice that can call us out of our tomb. Love is the only voice that can unbind us and walk with us as we explore the difficult road of new life. Love is the only voice that can bring us Easter.

Amen.