

"Come Out of the Tomb" – John 11:1-45 – April 2, 2017

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Today is the Fifth Sunday in Lent and our journey with Jesus to Jerusalem continues. If you've noticed these past few weeks, the passages from John's gospel tend to be rather lengthy. Unlike the other gospels, where the stories are much more concise, John draws each tale out, giving great detail. This story of the raising of Lazarus is one of my favorites. This is a powerful story as it deals with life death and faith. It is a story filled with despair and hope, drama and conflict, anguish and jubilation.

The story begins with the illness of a man named Lazarus. His sisters, Mary and Martha, sent a message to Jesus to let him know. Jesus had a close relationship with this family, but he waited two days before traveling to see them. When Jesus informed his disciples of his plan to return to Judea, they were stunned and reminded him that he was not welcome there. In fact, the last time they were in Judea, he was almost killed by stoning. But he reassured them, "Look. Aren't there twelve hours of daylight? If people walk by day, they won't stumble, because the light of the sun guides them. But it is when they walk in the night that they stumble, because they have no light."

Here Jesus spoke metaphorically. In John's Gospel, any words referring to light and darkness have symbolic meanings. Earlier in this gospel, Jesus referred to himself as the Light of the World, saying, "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." Jesus was aware that he was running out of time. For him, the cross was in sight. But nighttime was still a few hours away.

After a day's journey, they neared the town of Bethany. By now Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. According to Jewish tradition, when someone died, the person's soul remained near the body, thinking it could return to it. By the fourth day after decomposition of the body was well under way, the soul would see that the body's face had changed. At that time, the soul would depart, realizing there was no longer any hope of returning to the body. The body was truly dead. I had a professor in seminary say that Lazarus wasn't just dead, by this time, he was dead dead.

When Martha heard that Jesus was on his way, she went out to greet him. Although Martha was deeply grieved by her brother's death, she remained calm as she spoke with Jesus. She said to him, not in rebuke, but with a touch of disappointment, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." She really believed that. No doubt she had heard of, or had witnessed, his healing of other sick people.

Martha found comfort in the presence of Jesus. For Lazarus, it seemed, it was too late. But with a deep faith touched with hope, Martha said to Jesus, "Even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask." In her grief, she was still able to believe there was more to come. Jesus told her, that Lazarus would rise again. She knew, according to tradition, that her brother would be resurrected, as all people would be, at the last day. But that was not what Jesus meant.

He 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?" Now unlike Martha, we already know the end of the story. Martha understood the belief of her people, but Jesus gave it a whole new meaning. He is saying the resurrection is not some event in the distant future. The resurrection is in fact a person, Jesus himself. And that life is now. Though our bodies may die, if we believe in Jesus, we will be raised to eternal life. If we live in Jesus now, not even death can separate us from him.

Martha responded to him. "Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." This is perhaps one of the most profound statements of faith in the Bible, calling him Lord, Christ, and God's Son all in one breath. Her affirmation did not change the fact that her brother is dead. She did not know what would happen next. But she chose to live in faith in Christ. In the same way, when we affirm our trust in Jesus - when we put our faith in him, that faith does not alter the circumstances of life. Tragedy and

trauma still occur, but when Jesus becomes the focus of our life, everything takes on a new look. We see and understand things differently. Even in the midst of her anguish, Martha's faith remained.

Martha went back to their house and told her sister Mary that Jesus was waiting for her. Mary rushed out to see him. When she saw Jesus, Mary fell at his feet, weeping. She cried, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." She used the same words as her sister Martha. But unlike her calm sister, Mary was overcome with grief. Unlike her sister, she was in no mood for a theological discussion about the resurrection. She was overwhelmed by emotion.

As Jesus witnessed the sobbing of Mary and the Jewish mourners, he became deeply disturbed in spirit and was troubled. The Greek words indicate anger more than sadness. Many scholars have speculated on the meaning of his anger here. Various suggestions have been given. One of the more widely accepted views is that Jesus was angry not at any specific thing, but with what sin and death have done to humanity. That he was angry about the condition of humanity living under the reign of death.

Jesus asked them where they had laid Lazarus, and they answered, "Lord, come and see." It was at this point that Jesus began to weep. These were people he loved, and he was deeply moved with emotion over the tragedy of the death of his close friend and the impact it had on the sisters. The Jews who had come to mourn noticed this. Some of them said, "See how he loved him!" And others scoffed, "Oh yeah? Well if he was able to make a blind man see, why didn't he keep this man from dying?"

Jesus approached the tomb, a cave with a large stone across the entrance. And Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Can you imagine the silence that ensued after that command? The Jewish mourners stopped mourning, the disciples shrugged their shoulders in confusion, Mary stopped crying and stared wide-eyed into the face of Jesus. And then ever-practical Martha broke the silence – "But Lord, he has been in there for four days...uh, the stench..." Jesus shook his head and sighed. He was not angry at her confusion, because he knew how hard this was to understand. He reminded her, "Didn't I tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" Poor Martha. She was only voicing what I am sure everyone felt at that moment. Any of us might have said the same thing. What on earth did Jesus think he could do now? Lazarus was dead, not just sort of dead, but dead dead. Even in light of her incredible expression of faith, Martha could not even imagine what Jesus was about to do.

Realizing that Jesus meant business, they rolled away the stone, and he began to pray out loud, thanking God and asking that those gathered would believe that God had sent Jesus. Then in a loud voice, Jesus called, "Lazarus, come out!" Imagine the scene - the disciples looking intently at the tomb. Some of the Jews are staring at Jesus, others are whispering and conspiring among themselves. Mary has covered her face with her hands, afraid to look. Martha is holding her breath. And in the intense silence that follows, a dead man comes out of the tomb, his hands and feet still wrapped in bandages, with a cloth over his face. And Jesus says, "Unbind him and let him go."

Does anything in this story sound familiar to you? Waiting three days before acting. Jesus troubled and weeping. The burial site is near Jerusalem. The tomb is a cave with a stone at the opening. The stone is rolled away. Jesus cries out with a loud voice. The grave cloth is left at the tomb. We cannot read this story without noticing, just below the surface, the passion that faces Jesus in the coming days. Jesus came to Bethany, knowing that by raising Lazarus, he risked his own life. And in fact, it was this very action that causes the authorities to move against Jesus. In the verses following this passage, the religious leaders came together and made the decision to put Jesus to death.

In many ways we are a lot like Lazarus. Obviously we are not physically dead, but in some ways we are dead to the life of fullness that Jesus has offered to us. We have become comfortable in our burial clothes, the old sins that weigh us down and keep us from experiencing this new life. The troubles of the world entomb us, and we feel trapped by fear and dread, doubt and powerlessness. Sometimes it is the monotony, the routine

of a life that seems to go from one trouble to the next. We become resigned to a life of boredom, wondering if it will ever change. Even if we give up our desire for stuff, our longing for material possessions, our efforts then turn to a type of works righteousness. We feel we have to earn God's grace, not truly believing that God offers this new life freely. And in many ways the fear of death itself rests so heavily upon us, we miss out on the life that ever so steadily passes us by.

We're all entrapped in one kind tomb or another. And Jesus stands at the entryway, calling our name, bidding us to come out. If we remain in our tombs we miss out on the resurrection life that Jesus offers. We miss out on a life of fullness. A life where Jesus promises to walk with us, giving us light to illuminate our path. A life where troubles still happen, but one in which we know Jesus will weep with us when we experience the hurts that come.

We have been summoned by the one who is life himself to abandon our burial clothes and to exit the tomb to walk with him into a new life. Jesus said to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?" He poses to us the same question. Is it simply a theological question whose answer makes no difference? Or is it a question that invites us into a new way of living, a new way of greeting each new day, a new way of experiencing each moment, a new way of responding to the world around us.

Each one of us is Lazarus, four days dead in the tomb. Unable to do anything for ourselves, except to respond to the power of God. Jesus stands outside, commands the stone to be rolled away, and calls our name. He calls us into to a new life. A life that is eternal, a life that begins now. How will you respond to that call?