

Love Liberates

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*Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 26, 2023*

Scripture

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 this 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.

Sermon

Jesus took an enormous risk raising Lazarus—and he knew it. In John’s view, the raising of Lazarus is the catalytic event that leads to Jesus’ crucifixion. If the religious authorities were furious over the healing of the man born blind (John 9), and they were, with the raising of Lazarus, they’re apoplectic. The chief priests were seething and scheming to kill Jesus and even planning to put Lazarus to death (Jn. 12:10). They wanted to remove any evidence of Jesus and his miraculous signs because people were beginning to trust him. John tells us that after raising Lazarus, Jesus “no longer walked about openly” (Jn. 11:54), for it wasn’t safe.

A risk, yes, but according to John, Jesus is entirely in command of the situation. There’s intentionality around everything he says and does. Jesus is moving the narrative. He knows what he’s doing. And in this story, and throughout John’s Gospel, love guides his every step.

Love permeates this story. Jesus loves Lazarus, and even though Jesus delays his visit to Bethany for two days, love determines his decision to stay behind. Love leads him to Mary and Martha, lost in grief. Jesus appears on a scene drowning in tears and sorrow. Lazarus is dead. It’s been four days. Every detail is significant in John’s Gospel. Four days. In Jesus’s time, the dead were buried immediately. The mourners came later. Jewish belief held that the soul hovered near the body for three days and departed. John tells us twice that Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days, so there’s no chance of resuscitation. Lazarus is truly, unquestionably dead.

Martha is the first to see Jesus. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died”! Where were you? Why did you not come sooner? Jesus assures her, “Your brother will rise again.” It doesn’t sound like a compassionate response. Listen carefully to what Martha says, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” In other words, Sure, I believe in the resurrection, but that’s no consolation for me today. My brother is dead. And what does Jesus say? “I am the resurrection and the life” (Jn. 11:25).

Jesus agrees with Martha about a future resurrection of the dead. But he also wants her to know that something else is true. Claiming for himself the divine name I AM, first revealed to Moses in Exodus (3:14), Jesus says, “I am the resurrection”—not I will be one day. “I am the resurrection and the life.” He is resurrection. Now, not in some far-off future. His entire life embodies resurrection. And resurrection is accessible to us—now—in him.

What is resurrection? Sure, it refers to renewed life, life after physical death. But resurrection also means more than this for Jesus. Just as there was more than physical healing going on in the story of the man born blind (Jn. 9), so, too, there’s more going on here than

bodily resurrection. The physical resurrection is affirmed, but the physical is an entrée to something beyond the physical, which includes the physical, but something else, something metaphysical.

It is significant that Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life." And with his identification with life, we begin to see what resurrection is about. "Life" here is *zōē*, one of the most important theological words in John's Gospel. He uses it thirty-six times. The verb form *zaō* occurs seventeen times. In the previous chapter of John, we find Jesus saying, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn. 10:10). This *zōē*-life is full life, meaningful life, and purposeful existence; it's about more than breathing. John tells us, "In him was life and the life was the light of all people" (Jn. 1:4). Jesus gives us "living water," *zōē*-water (Jn. 7:38) to quench every thirst (Jn. 4:14). Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (Jn. 8:12). This *zōē*-life is God's life embodied in Jesus. He is full life, brimming with life that is here and now infused with God's love. And this is what John means by "eternal life." It's a certain quality of life marked by abundance, joy, peace, and love available to us, now and forever. [1] This is resurrection—everything that calls us to *zōē*-life!

Martha leaves Jesus, and Mary arrives and falls at his feet, exhausted from grief. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus sees her weeping. He sees the others also weeping. Jesus allows himself to be affected, to be touched by their grief. The Greek here is very strong. Jesus is "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." Troubled to his core. The Greek suggests that Jesus was shuddering, shaking with grief.

Shaking, trembling with grief, Jesus says, "Where have you laid him?"

"Lord, come and see."

Then Jesus begins to weep. The mourners see his tears and say, "See how much he loved him!" (Jn. 11:36).

Nowhere in scripture do we find Jesus so emotional, vulnerable, and human. The place where he is most vulnerable, overcome by grief, is precisely the place where the crowd sees his love. And what happens next is an extraordinary expression of his love and its power.

"Roll away the stone."

In, with, and through love, Jesus confronts death and cries, "Lazarus, come out!" And the dead man comes out.

"Unbind him, and let him go."

Resurrection. Life. Love. They're almost synonymous. Jesus's life, like God's life, is the outflow of love. Love flows into life, which generates life, new life where life had been lost or absent, yielding resurrection. Resurrection is both an event and a force; it's an experience that flows from the depths of God's love.

And this love isn't sentimental love—there's nothing sentimental about this story. And it's certainly not romantic love. This love is more than a feeling. It's a force, and it's fierce, and it's strong, and it's determined. I think the novelist Graham Greene (1904-1991) beautifully captures this aspect of love in his novel *The Power and the Glory*. Set in the 1930s, a Mexican priest in prison talks to his atheist captors about God's love. It is often unrecognizable; he says, "it might even look like hate, it would be enough to scare us—God's love. It set fire to a bush in the desert, didn't it, and smashed open graves and set the dead walking in the dark." [2]

Powerful. Unsettling. Disturbing. It's never what we expect. "Love is as strong as death" (Song of Solomon 8:6), says scripture. Stronger, even. In the strength of this love, Jesus cries with a loud voice, yells into death, into non-existence, into nothingness; Jesus shouts into the void itself and commands: "Lazarus, come out!"

I wonder how long did it take. Contemporary artist and poet Jan Richardson drew my attention to something I had never noticed before. "I am continually struck," she says, "by how Jesus calls out to Lazarus but does not go into the tomb to drag him out." I love this observation. "When he hears the sound of his name—spoken, I keep imagining, in utter love and hope—Lazarus has to choose whether he will take that first step that will lead him out of his own grave." [3] Was it love calling out love from within Lazarus that led him out? Did Lazarus' love for Jesus draw him out of the tomb? Eventually, John tells us, the "dead man came out" wrapped in his death clothes.

"Unbind him," Jesus said, "and let him go" (Jn. 11:44).

That's what God's love does. Right there. That's what love does.

Poet Maya Angelou (1927-2014) said she discovered in her life, "Love liberates. It doesn't just hold—that's ego. Love liberates. It doesn't bind." [4] That's what God's love looks like in our lives.

"Lazarus, come out!" God's love confronts death. This love speaks life into dark places, places of deterioration and decay. Love speaks into the void and nothingness of death itself and forces it to yield life, to yield life resurrected. God's love summons us into life.

This is such a rich and powerful text because there is more than just physical resurrection going on here. "Lazarus, come out!" This text was very important to me in my own coming journey as a gay Christian. There is so much in this text that speaks of the gospel. For I had to choose to take those steps toward love, the love that was calling me out. I had to see and trust that love always liberates. It sets us free and releases us. This love doesn't hold on, doesn't possess. It doesn't limit and narrowly define. God's love is not confining. It doesn't bind. Instead, God's love unbinds us from that which seeks to destroy and obliterate us. This love unbinds us from the hold of death, from all that is lifeless and dead in us, that holds us back from experiencing life in all its fullness. God's love releases us from the past, from events of the dead past that bind and hold us. Just as love unraveled the strips of burial cloth inviting a dead man to walk out from death, alive and free, God's love continues to unravel that which binds us, that holds us, holds us back, setting us free to walk out in freedom.

Yes, love liberates Lazarus. Love liberates Mary and Martha. And I even like to think that love liberates Jesus from his own grief. This love is fierce and strong and good and beautiful. It's often unsettling and disturbing because it has the power to conquer death. But then you might ask, why is it such a threat? Why do so many people want to shut it down? Because there are plenty of forces, within us and outside us, individuals, ideas, philosophies, and even religious communities that want to keep people wrapped up and bound in lifeless tombs, afraid of life, afraid of resurrection, afraid of zōē-life.

But love liberates us! This is the gospel. And we get to live the good news by liberating, freeing, and releasing one another in the church. Jesus says to the crowd, to the community around him witnessing resurrection, "Unbind him, and let him go." He's not talking to one individual here. It's plural in the Greek. You all. "You all, together, unbind him and let him go. "Y'all or all y'all, unbind him, and let him go" (Jn. 11:44). [5] All of us, together. You see, it's our task as a community to do the unbinding. And whenever we see the church trying to bind people, we have to question whether the Spirit of the Lord is there.

We are here to unbind one another, to release one another from what binds us so that we can walk out into the daylight in freedom and in light. This is what God’s love does all the time.

As we move closer to Holy Week:

Where is God calling you out by name? And, in love, are you willing to respond?

What’s needing liberation, unbinding in your life?

What does the church need to unbind in the world today?

Who among us needs freeing to walk out into God’s light and love?



Image: *The Raising of Lazarus*, William Blake (1757-1827)

Sources

- [1] Jaime Clark-Soles, *Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 73-74.
- [2] Graham Green, *The Power and the Glory* (Penguin Classics, 2015), originally published in 1940.
- [3] From Jan Richardson’s blog Painted Prayer Book, Lent 5 (2017):
<https://paintedprayerbook.com/2017/03/31/lent-5-the-lazarus-blessing>
- [4] See Maya Angelou’s Master Class interview with Oprah Winfrey:
<https://www.oprah.com/own-master-class/maya-angelous-master-class-quotes>
- [5] Jaime Clark-Soles, 77ff.