

Sermon on John 11:1-45
Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 2, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ...

It would be a great understatement for me to say how powerful this Lenten season has been for me! It has not only been a season of reflection – which it has surely been – but it has also been a time for actually living through the passage from life to death, and then back to life again. Most of you know that my father Alvin died on March 16, after suffering a stroke on February 14th. It was just two weeks later when we learned that our sister in Christ, Rhynda Landt, was going into hospice care. She was in the same emergency room as my father had been in, when we learned that she was not a candidate for a liver transplant. And so I spent most of January, February and March between hospitals and hospice, watching and waiting for my father and a good friend to die. Some of you are sharing these same experiences – as I just learned from Joy Lehman that Tim’s father, Doug, died on Friday (the day of my father’s memorial service). There have been more instances of suffering that you are dealing with, so let’s just say that we all know the experience of living with illness and death, with those who are closest to us. We all know the feelings of grief and loss; and this time of year is our reminder.

So it is ironic – fitting and a comfort – to read today’s gospel, the story of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead! We heard how Lazarus’s family, his sisters Mary and Martha, went through their grieving process with the help of their neighbors and friends, and the faith community which surrounded them. Lazarus’s death was more sudden and expected than the death of a 91 year old, so the grief of his family was very real. Like a friend who dies too young from liver failure, or a parent who dies from cancer or a stroke, there is true heartache here.

This week as I prepared to preach on this text, while also living through preparations for my father’s memorial service, I am so grateful for the friends and mentors – and biblical scholars – who have helped me through this passage from the gospel. I am particularly grateful to David Lose, from the Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg, who found a way for me to hear it as good news. (Even though this story is often called Jesus’ greatest miracle, a foretaste of Jesus’ resurrection on Easter, it can be difficult for us to find the gospel in it.) David Lose has found three “movements” in the story, a musical term which means essentially that there are three themes that guide us through the story. Usually we only see two. The three movements are: *heartache, miracle, and invitation*.

As I said, we know all about the *heartache*. We live it all the time. In John’s story, it was not only that Lazarus got sick, and died – causing grief for his

sisters, Mary and Martha. But it was also Jesus' *delay* in coming to see Lazarus before he died from his illness, which only added to the heartache of his family. John says that when Jesus first heard of Lazarus's illness, and the message from Mary and Martha to please come, Jesus seemed to pass it off, saying "*His illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory.*" Not the usual compassion we expect from Jesus. So he didn't come right away. Not until Lazarus had died, and was in the grave for three days, did Jesus arrive on the scene. He arrived to find a household in mourning; in fact the whole town of Bethany seems to have come out to grieve. They didn't welcome Jesus with open arms – there is an underlying disappointment that Jesus had come too late; he had failed them. Each sister said to Jesus, in turn, "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*"

Ouch. That must have hurt. But it was honest. How many of us have heard from a friend or family member that we were "too late", that we weren't there when they really needed us to be there, that we didn't make that visit when we should have. I know that pain, and the guilt that comes with it. We also know the accusation – *that sure, God did miracles all through the Bible, and saved all kinds of people from illness and death in ancient times, a long time ago, but where is God now? Where is God when we all are looking for help? Does God care? Where is Jesus when I need him? I need him NOW – not just some promise to come!* Yes, we know the pain and the hurt, the disappointment we have when we think God isn't there to help us, when we are praying really hard. *Heartache.* And as we come to learn, Jesus shares the heartache. When Jesus saw Mary weep, as well as the friends and neighbors who were there consoling her, Jesus wept, too. Even as they blamed him and wondered why Jesus hadn't been there, they saw how much Jesus loved Lazarus, and his sisters, Martha and Mary both.

Next comes the familiar part: the *miracle*. Remember how Jesus had said that Lazarus's illness wouldn't lead to death, but to God's glory? Well, it happened to come true. But first we hear what sounds like a "test". Jesus asked Martha, "*Do you believe in the resurrection of the dead?*" For just like today, there were some who did, and some who didn't. Jesus did, and he asked this of Martha not to test her, but to remind her of what he had taught her, and what she believed. It was like a gentle reminder, asking her to "remember who you are, and what you believe". So Martha replied, "*I know that he will rise at the resurrection of the dead.*" The promise seems so far off, like a theological theory meant for some far off future time, long after we are all dead, of no use to us now. But then Jesus said the words that changed everything: "*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.*" These words are repeated so often at Christian funerals, and we heard them Friday at my father's memorial service,

alongside the words “*For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall have eternal life.*”

Neither Martha nor Mary could understand what Jesus said – it sounded like a riddle, or worse yet, some far-off promise that they couldn’t comprehend in their grief. Jesus even wanted to see Lazarus’s body. But it had been three days in the grave, without embalming, Mary said, and there would be a stench. We know about that. After my father died in hospice, they came to clean his body and prepare for the funeral directors to come. We could stay as long as we wished, there was no hurry for us to leave. But we were gently warned – try to have anyone else come within a few hours at the most, because of what will happen to the body, once the spirit of life is gone. They left the windows open, on that warm March day, and we waited just a while longer for our daughters to come, and then we all left, before evening.

And so Jesus went to the tomb. In the midst of all their disappointment and doubt, Jesus prayed, and called for Lazarus to come out. And miracle of miracles, *Lazarus came out* from his tomb. This was the greatest of miracles, which no one had ever seen (though the Bible spoke of such things, which God had the power to do). Everyone who was there witnessed Lazarus coming out of his tomb, still wrapped in his burial shroud – no thunder or lightning, no Hollywood special effects, just Lazarus the man, back from the dead. Something none of us get to witness, much less hope for. But in John’s gospel, this is not called a miracle. It was a SIGN – of God’s power, in the person of God’s SON, who had been sent as a sign of God’s compassion. God knows the suffering and cries of human beings, and sent Jesus to show us the way to salvation and bring life to the world.

“*And so many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.*”

As great a miracle and sign of hope that this is, often we end sermons with the miracle of God’s power in Jesus. It may seem that the lesson is *to believe in the resurrection*. Which seems like a test we can’t pass, for who has enough faith to “believe”. It comes and goes. But Jesus did something else, after Lazarus came out from his grave. And what was that? Jesus told the people to “*Unbind him, and let him go.*” For Lazarus’s hands and feet were bound with strips of cloth, and his face was wrapped in a cloth. Jesus invited the people to *participate in Lazarus’s unbinding* – he didn’t just remove the bands of cloth himself!

So David Lose emphasizes this third movement in the story: Jesus’ *invitation to all of us to participate in resurrection!* It’s an invitation for us to help remove what binds us to suffering and death, which prevent us from seeing the hope that Jesus gives us, or experiencing the promise of new life, which is, after all, the very point of the gospel! Not only eternal life in the future after we die

(which, of course, it is). But also new life here and now, today, in this life, in the midst of our own disappointments, suffering, and grief.

I'll admit, this can be the hard part: participating in our own unbinding from sin and death, so that we can move on to new life! When I sat by my father's bedside, I was there at the very moment his spirit left him. I was able to observe his last breath, like a gulp of air, as it seemed like his spirit left his body through his mouth (though the spirit was invisible to me). Amazing. But it also seemed like my own anxieties, sorrow and grief passed away in that very moment, seemingly lifted into the air along with his spirit, his last breath. From then on I had a spirit of peace and calm, and I was ready to move on – although I waited for my family to say goodbye. But Alvin was no longer there; his spirit had moved on, unbound by his earthly body.

We know very well, by experience, how we are bound to the sufferings and anxieties of this life. We experience them every day. We depend on them, as sometimes they make us feel “safe” – the alternative of new life came sometimes appear scary and strange, unknown and different. So how can we participate in the unbinding of ourselves, and one another, from sin and death? Because this is the essence of Jesus's invitation – to have faith to let go, be unbound, to become free – through faith! Just as we were taught by our hospice nurses, to tell my father that he was free to go, that he could let go and become free, that we would be okay as a family, and he didn't have to be bound to his bed.

So those nurses helped unbind me from being bound to my father's dying body or his death, and trust in his resurrection, to trust in the promise of God. Our extended family, our friends, this community of faith has helped unbind our family from being stuck in our grief, from being able to see hope in the future.

Sometimes we don't realize the true hope of the resurrection until we experience it ourselves, as my family and I have in the weeks since Dad's death, and in the memorial service last Friday – as you helped unbind us with song, prayer, and love.

But this is not only for times of death. We can all participate in the miracle of unbinding one another from the sufferings of this life – from pain and suffering from injustice as well as illness, from prejudice and hate – with the compassionate care, acts of love, and words of hope that set us free from sin and hate in this world today. The good news today is not only that we can *believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come – but that you and I can participate in the unbinding of all that prevents us – and the world – from living the life which God has promised. Thanks be to God for sending Jesus to live and die for us, for raising Lazarus and us from the dead, and giving us the invitation to participate in this new life – for ourselves and for the world. Amen.*