

Bound? Or Not Bound?

John 11:1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he 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 seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." 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. Whoever

believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. 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 also have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for 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 lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with 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 he did, believed in him,

Turn off the sun. Drain out the sea. Let the moon fall from the sky, because our wife, mother, sister, grandmother and great-grandmother is gone. That's how an obituary in a Phoenix newspaper began. This is the cry of a family suffering the loss of a loved one. This is the cry of Mary and Martha at the loss of a dear brother. This is the cry of Jesus when he hears the news of Lazarus' death, which the original language describes as "gut wrenching". This is the cry of Psalm 130, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord, Hear my voice!" We are bound by grief and loss.

Anyone who has lost a close loved one knows the pain. We know how death reaches up from the grave and seeks to suffocate us. Death seems to be everywhere. We hear of the death of young children in a fire, the death of many in the conflict in the Middle East. Death strikes at us as we hear of young people – and old – dying of cancer. Our grip on life seems a little more tenuous with each edition of the newspaper, each nightly news. We are bound.

We see ads on television and we think, just maybe, I can cheat the aging process with the right cream, the right gizmo to tie around my waist to keep the muscles from slipping. Death is at work, every day we get one day closer. Some day the grief will be because of our death. We are bound. We cannot set ourselves free. The fear of death can paralyze, we are bound. We can be tempted to avoid all risk, thinking that we can avoid death. It can lead to retreating from life -- for fear of death.

Lazarus died, there is no denying it. Those around felt the pain, Jesus included. We know of what they speak. Death takes its toll on everyone. Death cannot be denied or avoided.

In the midst of grief we cannot understand why Jesus would stay where he was for two more days. He had the power to intervene, to heal Lazarus -- why would he not go? In the midst of the pain we can easily miss what is really going on. Jesus is not bound by death's timetable. Jesus is not bound by death. Jesus said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified." Just as the healing of the blind man was to give God glory, so too the raising of Lazarus. God was not bound by dry bones in the desert, God is not bound by death.

It is in death that God does his greatest work. It is in facing death that Jesus is triumphant

over death. The raising of Lazarus is a prelude, a chance for the people to give glory to God, before Jesus himself faces and conquers death. Death is not something that can destroy. Death does not bind us. Death takes its toll on us but God is triumphant. There is hope only in facing death. We confess in the 23rd Psalm, "even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil." It is the confidence in God that allows Ezekiel to believe that God could act on these dry bones even though he hasn't. It is faith in God that allows the psalmist to cry "Out of the depths" even though God seems far away. It is faith that allows us to rest upon the promises of God in the midst of the pain at the death of a loved one. It is faith that allows us to say with Martha, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world", even though death appears to have won the day. We know we will be unbound.

Because of faith in Jesus, rather than fear death, the shortness and uncertainty of life can help us embrace life in all its fullness. For many cancer survivors it is the diagnosis of cancer that helped them to embrace life, and their life takes on new brilliance. If we know that death does not have the final say, we can live life to its fullest, open to God's leading in all of our days, knowing that no matter what happens, God is with us. God is not bound by death and neither are we.

Central to our faith is the death and resurrection of Jesus. Central, too, is our death and resurrection. We speak of baptism in terms of death, "when we were baptized into Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death." Death to old ways, death to old priorities and not without pain. It is in facing death that we are led to new life. We are unbound, set free. Life takes on a new vitality. We are open to the leading of God no matter where that may lead.

We must die daily to the old death denying, life denying ways because it is tempting to hang on to what we have. It is tempting to deny death, but in doing so we also deny the opportunity for God to work through that death. To avoid death is to avoid the resurrection.

Our world needs people willing to confront death, and discover life. People willing to believe that God is able to act even when life seems as unlikely around us as a bunch of old bones. The world needs people who have died to themselves and been born

to new life.

Robert Capon said, “We are in a war between dullness and astonishment.” The most critical issue facing Christians is not abortion, pornography, disintegration of the family, moral absolutes, drugs, racism, or sexuality. The critical issue today is dullness. We have lost our astonishment. The Good News is no longer Good News, it is just okay news. Christianity is no longer life changing, but is merely life enhancing. Jesus doesn’t change people into wild-eyed radicals anymore, he changes them into nice people! If Christianity is simply about being nice, I’m not interested.

“What happened to radical Christianity,” Capon wants to know, “the un-nice brand of Christianity that turned the world upside-down? What happened to the category-smashing, life-threatening, anti-institutional gospel that spread through the first century like wildfire and was considered (by those in power) dangerous? What happened to the kind of Christians whose hearts were on fire, who had no fear, who spoke the truth no matter what the consequence, who made the world uncomfortable, who were willing to follow Jesus wherever he went? What happened to the kind of Christians who were filled with passion and gratitude, and who every day were unable to get over the grace of God?”

Death and resurrection are central to our faith. To believe in God, to give God the glory as was seen in the raising of Lazarus is to look beyond death to the new life promised by God. This new life begins today and continues into eternity. We are not bound by death

To live the new life requires that we embrace the pain that comes with the death of what was and trust that God will be with us in the future. Then Jesus’ words for Lazarus can also be our words, “Unbind him, let him go!”

Philip Tesch
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 North Highlands, California