

This is the third in a series of Lenten sermons on the death and resurrection of Lazarus. Two weeks ago, I began by claiming Jesus loves us too much to fulfill our expectations of him. His dreams for us are far greater than we could imagine. Last week we encountered Jesus' piercing question: "Do you believe this?" Today we discover that whether we believe it or not, Jesus refuses to abandon us to the tombs where we are losing our lives.

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Remember, the story began with Lazarus' sisters sending a message to Jesus that said, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But Jesus did not do what Martha and Mary, and I imagine Lazarus wanted him to do. The healer did not hurry to their house in the nick of time. Now Lazarus is dead.

It must have been agonizing for his sisters to watch him slowly slip away, and then to place his lifeless body in a tomb and watch as the stone was rolled across the door. If you have ever watched someone die, you know that despite Hollywood's portrayals, death is not pretty. It doesn't smell good. Sometimes it hurts. And it always hurts to watch someone you love die, because you are powerless to stop it.

I think this is why we don't talk about death. My grandmother was very comfortable discussing death, but she never talked about sex. By contrast, we talk about sex all the time, but the next time you're at a party, just try to get a good conversation going on death and dying. You probably won't be invited to the next party.

In spite of our refusal to talk about it, we experience the death, of something, all the time. Life involves enduring one loss after another, and it's never pretty. What have you ever succeeded in holding in this life? Did you get to hang on to your children, or your parents? Did you get to keep your youth, or your work, or your health? Even if you are holding these things for now, we know it's only a matter of time before we give it back up. That can make you a little crazy with fear if you think about it, which is why we don't think about it. But the fear is still shaving away at your soul.

Nothing will suck away your life like fear. So, this isn't just Lazarus who is in a tomb. The Gospel is never just about what happened to the people in the Bible, but it's the story of God's drama in our lives as well. This narrative, then, is about us.

We entered Lazarus' tomb on the day we became afraid to be fully alive, or the day we gave up our passions for the illusions of security. We walked into the tomb when we got hurt by someone we trusted and swore we will never let someone else get close again. Or maybe it was on the day we settled for a world filled with violence, and a city filled with injustice, and told ourselves, "It is all too overwhelming. I can't change any of that. All I can do is tend my own garden." On that day we thought we were shutting the frightening world out. But we were only shutting ourselves into a tomb.

I've told you this before—people prefer the misery they know to the mystery they do not. But Jesus will never settle for our familiar misery. So, he stands before the sepulchers of our lives and says, "Take away the stone. You have been dead long enough. It's time to come back to life."

Then Martha, one of the persons closest to Lazarus said, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." It was as if she was saying, "Jesus, this is just death and loss. It stinks, but everyone knows about it. We were hoping you would prevent the loss of our brother. But you didn't so we're just left with the inevitable—another experience of decline and death." How many times have we echoed this prayer saying, "Lord, I was hoping you would do something about the chaos in the world, or about the chaos in my own life. I prayed and prayed."

Jesus responds, “Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?” That is what belief is for Christians. It is a way of seeing. If we only believe in what we see, we will have to submit to the power of the tombs as the final word. But if we believe in who we see, the Savior, then we have found a power greater than the tomb. It doesn’t matter what the loss or death-like experience may be, when Jesus is near there is always more life to come. And that is why we come to worship—to renew our vision of the Savior who is not done.

So, they took away the stone. Did that mean they believed Jesus was going to raise the dead? Maybe. But all we know is that they just did the next thing Jesus told them. And that is all the belief we are required to have. What comes next is up to the Savior.

The way the gospel writer John has described this scene is fascinating to me. Mary and Martha and those in mourning are standing around the tomb. The stone has been rolled back from the tomb. Lazarus is in the tomb. And where is Jesus? Maybe he’s at the door, but he is clearly not walking into that tomb.

That’s what we want when we were in a tomb. We want Jesus to come in and console us, and to tell us we were wronged. We want him to make the tomb more comfortable, maybe redecorate a bit because we are planning on staying there a long time. But Jesus doesn’t like tombs. He didn’t spend much time in his own tomb. He’s not going into yours.

Instead, this one who is the Resurrection and the Life stands at the open door of your tomb, and calls you by name: “Lazarus, Jane, Robert, Craig, Come forth!” With those words we hear a call to come out of the grief. It was supposed to be a long hard process, but not a soul mate. Come out of your fear. Come out of your cynicism and comfortable despair. Come out of this dark place where you have nurtured so much hurt. Why are you settling for this tomb—this place of death?

“Then the dead man came out, his hands and his feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him and let him go.’” If I am reading this correctly, Jesus is the one who brings the dead back to life. But he expects us to unbind them and set them free. Our job is not to save anyone at work, our in the city neighborhoods, or even in our own families. Only Jesus can do that. Our job is to unbind them when they are sick and tired of being sick and tired.

Every time you teach an inner-city child to read, bring groceries to a food pantry, or volunteer at one of our Social Witness projects, you are helping to unbind people from their poverty. Every time you let someone lean on your belief that God is not done or choose to love and forgive when the harsh words are flying about, you are unbinding them from despair and anger. Every time you refuse to settle for a world in which the haves have so much and the have nots have not a chance, your own heart is unbound from a miserly fear. And through it all people are being freed to walk in the new life Jesus is calling them to receive.

Unbinding people and setting them free is a fabulous calling in life. But you cannot do any of that if you are still in a tomb.

Your disappointment, heartache, and grief has been great. I know. But the stone has been rolled back. And the one who gives new life is standing at the door calling for you. Isn’t it time to come forth? Amen.