

“Unbound By Love”

John 11: 1-45

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The story of Lazarus being raised from the dead is epic. Not only is it over twice as long as most scripture we read on Sunday mornings, but it covers all of the major themes of Jesus' life: making miracles, helping others understand who he is, challenging his opponents, compassion for those in pain, and resurrection. It is a lot! There is so much packed in that we could do a whole Bible study series on this one passage.

And...If I'm going to be really honest... The story isn't even finished. It goes on for another 6 verses. Some of the witnesses who saw Jesus bring Lazarus back to life report to the authorities. The authorities listen to them, and after hearing their story, they planned to put Jesus to death. Before this, they were suspicious of who he was and what he was doing, but this moment, the resurrection of Lazarus, is what filled them with fear and put into motion the remaining days of Jesus' life. The lectionary stopped at verse 45, but if you want to know how we get from here to Palm Sunday and then to Easter, keep reading. There is more to this story.

Jesus had to know that doing something this big and this miraculous would cause his opponents to be even more fearful of him. He had to know that what has been simmering beneath the surface was about to boil over the top. He had to know that his time was coming to an end, and therefore it was time to reveal his identity to everyone—followers and fearful alike. Why else would he hear that his dear friend Lazarus was ill and not immediately respond? Why would he wait, knowing that Lazarus's life was in peril? Knowing that the time to heal him was limited?

Jesus knew that if he arrived after Lazarus's death, the family would be surrounded by all of their friends and the community, helping them grieve, mourning this death together. Jesus knew that

this would include the same folks who have been questioning him and doubting him and trying to make him misstep. He knew it would include the people who would set into motion his betrayal and death, but he does not waver from his mission. He remained focused on what he was supposed to do. He approached Lazarus's tomb, knowing that by facing death head-on he would be able to bring about life.

Making life where there was once death is fully a “God thing.” Resurrection of this kind is bigger than us mere mortals. It is Jesus' moment to say, “I am the Son of God. I am Holy. I can not only resurrect, but I **am** the resurrection.” It is his moment to demonstrate that he is more than human. He is set apart from the rest of us. He is from God and of God in a way that mystifies and stupefies. He is the living, human, demonstration of how God moves in the world and how God relates to us. He is our breathing, feeling, weeping, reminder of who God is and what God does. And when he goes to Judea, and when he encounters Martha and Mary grieving their brother, and when he commanded Lazarus to come out from the tomb, this is what Jesus reminds us of:

Jesus reminds us that when we are wrapped up in the unspeakable grief of losing someone we love, Jesus will weep with us. Mary and Martha were traumatized at the loss of their brother. They were angry and didn't understand how this could have happened. They are sad beyond words. Mary, who would soon wash Jesus's feet with expensive oil, falls to his feet and covers those same feet with her tears. And in that moment, Jesus wept. Jesus took on their sadness and joined them in crying out. Joined them in their mourning and their sorrow. This is not a God who is distant and far away. This is not a God who takes death lightly. This is our God, our Holy Parent, who came down and walked among us. Who cried with us and comforted us and felt our sadness as his own sadness. In the middle of this story there is a short sentence. In many translations, including the King James that so many of us grew up with, it is only two words. The shortest verse in the Bible, but one of the most powerful. Jesus wept.

So often in the face of tragedy or death we ask “Where is God?” This story is our reminder that God is with us, weeping. God does not take pleasure in our pain or does not leave us when we are

grieving. Instead, God joins us. God steps beside us. God cries out...Jesus wept. Two words that turn into one powerful example to one of the biggest questions we have. Jesus wept. God is with us in our pain. When we cry or grieve or suffer, we are not alone. God is there beside us.

Jesus reminds us in this powerful story of loss and death, that when we are unable to see anything beyond the death that is in front of us or the tears that consume us, God will still be working to create new life and to breath life back into spaces we believe are no longer capable of living. It is the promise of that we have been given by Jesus: that death will never have the final word—life will always return, even when we least expect it. Even when we think it is not possible. In the darkest, dreariest of places, and in the most hopeless of moments, Jesus's promise to us is that even there, light will shine. Even there, hope will reside.

Jesus's promise is that even when we do not fully believe in God's power or in God's love or in the life that God brings into this world—when we doubt and question and withhold our full, unabashed, all-in, faith in that life...God will still move among us. God will still work miracles. God will continue to demonstrate that there is always light, and there is always life, and there is always love.

This is the Good News that Martha and Mary witnessed. They taught us that God does not depend on our faith to be in this world. God just is. Martha and Mary did not believe that Jesus would bring back their brother—not in the way he does. Even as Martha said, “yeah, I believe in you. Of course. I know what you can do.”..You know that she doesn't fully believe. You know that she wants to believe, but her grief is too strong, her tears too salty and blinding. But even without her full professional of faith, Jesus remains present. He shows her evidence of life in the face of death.

The Good News is that even when we doubt, even when we don't know what to believe, and even when we are too consumed by sorrow to believe anything other than the pain and inevitability of death, God is still with us. God is still quietly working. God is still committed to bringing about signs of new life and life renewed. God does not depend on our steadfastness or our proclamations in order to bring about new life, in order to do the things we have come to count on doing. God does them despite

our best efforts to block out God or deny God or deny that anything good is left in the world. When we are in the dark, blinding place of grief, God is the one that finally lifts us out. God sets us free. God unbinds us. God renews our lives.

I worry sometimes when I hear people that believe that if we aren't strong enough or brave enough or courageous enough in the face of whatever we are going through, that God won't stand by us anymore, that the Holy Spirit will fly somewhere else and abandon us, that Jesus will turn his back on us. But this epic story reminds us that if we are like Martha and Mary and our face is stained with tears and we are angry and sad and hurt and grieving, Jesus will weep with us. And if we are like Lazarus, with no ounce of life left in us, Jesus will find a way to renew our life. If we are the crowd of people, crying for our friend and uncertain what is going to happen, Jesus will show you that there is still life in this world, there is still hope, and there is still room for transformation.

This Good News is why I believe that we have an open communion table, open to anyone would like to eat with their brothers and their sisters, open to anyone searching for a sign of life or life renewed. It doesn't matter whether you are strong or weak, joyful or sorrowful, whether you believe in Jesus a lot or a little or not hardly at all. God does not depend on us to transform this table into a holy banquet. God transforms it. It has already happened. No matter who we are, no matter what we have experienced, no matter what we are faced with. There is a place for the Mary and Martha's at this table. There is a place for Lazarus. There is a place for you and me and all of us. Jesus is waiting for us at the feast, whether we see him or not. Jesus who was unwavering in his mission and fearless in the face of death is waiting to meet us. Waiting to break bread with us, not because we are strong, but because he is strong. Because he has shown that he will be with us, even in our darkest hour. Amen.