
The Raising of Lazarus: Unbind Him and Let Him Go (An Expository Sermon)

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A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Fifth Sunday of Lent
John 11: 1-45

John 11.1-45 *Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.*

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. What a lovely family trio this is. Mary was the sister who loved to listen to Jesus. Martha was the sister who loved to serve others. Lazarus was the brother who was ill. No family is consistently perfect, are we?

Each of us, from the smallest household, to the largest church, has people who like to listen, people who like to serve, and people who are sick. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. They keep showing up in the New Testament, and they keep showing up in church.

³ *So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."*

This is the way most of us speak with Jesus. We tell him what he already knows. "Lord, the one whom you love is ill." The Lord knows who among us is sick. The Lord knows our illnesses in deeper ways than we know them. But the Lord loves us in the midst of those illnesses.

⁴ *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."*

I believe all illness has that ultimate purpose: to be used for the glory of God. Some illnesses do lead to death. They are certainly sad. But all illnesses can also be vessels of the glory of God. Indeed, everything -even illness-- can mediate grace.

⁵ *Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*

Delay. Delay. Delay. The story of our lives. Why doesn't Jesus drop everything he is doing and rush over to see Lazarus?

"Don't you realize how needy I am?" "If you love me, why don't you respond immediately?" Those are the questions we demand of each other, aren't they?

Ah, but it is not the people who respond most urgently and most anxiously who love us most. Often, the people who are willing to drop everything and help us are the ones least equipped to help.

The friends who help us most are those not driven by the tyranny of the urgent, those not in the biggest hurry, those who are not most anxious, those who do not panic. The ones who love us most sometimes they take longer to arrive than others.

So it was with Jesus. He heard the news that Lazarus was ill, and he waited two days to respond. It was a long time. It was not because he did not love Lazarus. It was because his strength did not need to respond according to urgent schedules and anxiety. All strength, all health, is beyond our notions of time.

⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸ The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?"

Then, the time to move does arrive. Jesus does move. Once Jesus decides to return to Judea, his so-called disciples find plenty of reasons to stop him. Watch out for disciples and friends, family and co-workers, who are always finding reasons to stop.

There are always reasons against fulfilling the vision. Some on your team will say, "Don't go. Don't go there."

Are we always supposed to take the path of least resistance? No, Jesus will walk straight back through the area where they once tried to stone him. He will return.

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹ After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him."

Here beginneth the joke. Here begins the play on words. Is Lazarus merely asleep, or is he dead? The word "sleep" can mean both things.

¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead."

Lazarus is dead.

We hear these words all the time. They seem strict and hard to us. Some of us want to avoid the directness of those words. Some folks cannot hear the direct truth.

But, often, they are very pastoral words. "Lazarus is dead." We need to hear that directly sometimes. Your father is dead. Your mother has died. It's over. To hear the truth directly, even the most painful and devastating truth, is a first step in healing, and in salvation itself. Indeed, to hear the truth is the first step of resurrection. Lazarus is dead.

¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Ultimately, I have no idea what Thomas means here! Well, don't misunderstand me; I have lots of small ideas. Thomas wanted to die to this world, and he wanted to do it immediately. But, ultimately, death is a mystery. The act of Thomas here is a typical, impulsive disciple move.

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When

Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ *Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."*

Yes, we think this all the time. If only God were involved, if only I was closer to Jesus, then things would have gone my way. I wouldn't be in this hardship if Jesus has responded more quickly.

²² *But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."* ²³ *Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."* ²⁴ *Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."*

Here is where the story gains humorous altitude. Does sleep mean sleep, or death. Does resurrection mean something that happens now, or after we die? Well, it means both. Resurrection is about life now.

²⁵ *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,"* ²⁶ *and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"* ²⁷ *She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."*

All these stories in the gospel of John, these long passages which are the gospel during Lent, are about proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. Martha, like all of us, is meant to recognize Jesus, the Teacher, as the Messiah.

²⁸ *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."* ²⁹ *And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.* ³⁰ *Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.* ³¹ *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.* ³² *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."*

Yes, she repeats the same words as her sister Martha did. For all their sharp differences, Mary and Martha are actually quite similar. They love Jesus, but they believe that Jesus really came to fulfill their own, personal, and immediate desires. "If only God had been here, I would not have gone through all this pain." That is what we all say, and we are all wrong.

Jesus did not come to take away our pain. Jesus came to go through pain himself. Jesus came so that all of us could live through pain to resurrection.

³³ *When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.* ³⁴ *He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see."* ³⁵ *Jesus began to weep.* ³⁶ *So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"* ³⁷ *But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"*

Jesus wept. This verse, John 11.35, is the answer to many trivia contests; because it is the shortest verse in the entire Bible! Jesus wept. It is the shortest verse in the Bible, and maybe one of the most powerful, too. Jesus, the Son of God, knows sorrow and weeping. Jesus can be moved, and greatly disturbed. To love means to be able to be moved. Jesus loved Lazarus, his friend; and he loves Mary and Martha and their friends. Jesus is moved by their sorrow and pain.

³⁸ *Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.* ³⁹ *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."*

We move from the shortest verse in the Bible to one of the funniest. Roll away the stone? By this time -after four days""there will be an odor. Or, as the King James Version used to say: "Lord, he stinketh!" The Bible does not mince words when it comes to describing accurately!

But this verse is meaningful. Lord, he stinketh. Sometimes, in order to have a resurrection, matters are foul and messy. Resurrections do not happen when all is sterile and clean and smelling like our favorite room deodorizer. Where things stink, are exactly where resurrections can occur!

⁴⁰ *Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"* ⁴¹ *So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me.* ⁴² *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."* ⁴³ *When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"*

These are the great words of the gospel today. They are the words which could be on the lips of every one of us today. Wherever we want Resurrection, we should be able to proclaim: "Lazarus, come out! Be resurrected. Rise again!"

⁴⁴ *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."*

"Unbind him, and let him go!" I like these words more than I like "Lazarus, come out." Indeed, these words may be more powerful than words "Come out!"

Because now, the community needs to assist in the resurrection. "Unbind him, and let him go." There are some people here are yearning to live resurrection lives. There are some folks here who have been born again; they have risen from the dead!

But, they are still tangled up in burial clothes. They still have the sheets and coverings of death all over them. They are still bound up in something, bound up in old bondages, old arguments, old sin.

You know what that's like. You know you are living a new life, but you seem somehow to still be in bondage to the old life.

Here is where we need community. We need others. Often, it is the task of Christian community to complete the action of Resurrection. Jesus has called forth new life: Lazarus come out!" But he still has burial clothes on.

"Unbind him, and let him go." Those should be the words which are our orders every day, every new day. Unbind somebody. Where you find someone in bondage: your friend, your wife, your husband, your companion, even the stranger. Where you find someone struggling to be free, unbind them and let them go. Do not keep them tangled up in the old affairs of sin and death. Those clothes constrict and make us ill.

When we refuse to let someone go, when we refuse to forgive, when we refuse to see new life, it is we who are keeping them dead. The community has that power.

Jesus, therefore, proclaims to us, to all of us, to the Christian Church: "Unbind him, and let him go." Those are really the powerful words of today's gospel. Don't hold on to the past. Do not hold on to sin. Do not hold on to death!

Let someone go today. Release someone!

⁴⁵ *Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.*

Yes, if we really want the world to believe, we must show forth the resurrection life of Jesus, the new life of Jesus. Can we come out of our tombs? Can we unbind someone and let them go? If so, the work of Jesus will indeed be revealed, and the world will believe that he is the Savior of the World.

AMEN.

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