

Unbind him (and us)

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Lent 5A Raising of Lazarus

There is so much to work with in today's dramatic gospel story of the raising of Lazarus. This passage is the beginning of the end in the Gospel of John. The end of Jesus' ministry and the beginning of that march towards the cross of Good Friday and the glory of the empty tomb on Easter.

This passage really highlights how different the Gospel of John is from the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Besides the fact that the stories are much longer and told in great detail, they also are filled with metaphor and meaning far beyond the simple words and actions.

This is the last of the signs in John. The Synoptics tell of many miracles done by Jesus and these are all about how he does ministry. The focus is on who we should care for and about. John however has far fewer but they are all major healings or miracles. Starting with turning water into wine as the first sign in Cana, we had the healing of the man born blind last week and this week the raising of Lazarus who had been dead for four days.

That Lazarus had been dead and in the tomb for four days is really significant. Martha even notes there is a stench when Jesus commands the stone be rolled away from the cave. (You should all catch the foreshadowing there of the tomb as a cave with a stone rolled over the entrance) Jewish belief was that the soul hung around the body for three days and then departed to Sheol. That Jesus was able to resuscitate a corpse that had been dead this long was very significant.

The key to the difference is that all these signs are done so people may believe. Jesus says as much in this passage. "Father I know you have heard me and have always heard me, but I say this for the benefit of the crowd so that they may believe that you sent me." Earlier he says "I am glad I was not there when it happened so that you might believe." He asks Martha "Do you believe this?" after the famous "I am resurrection and I am life. Those who believe in me, even though they die will live and those who believe in me and live will never die."

Martha then answers the great I am statement, "Yes Lord I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God coming into the world." It is both a statement of belief but also the clear identification of who Jesus is. Also notice this is done by Martha and not Peter who never says these words in the Gospel of John.

I say this is also the end because of what follows this passage. Unfortunately what follows is important but is also never read during a Sunday service. It is only found in the daily lectionary.

7 So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. 48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." 49 But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! 50 You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." 51 He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, 52 and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. 53 So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

So this is also the beginning of the march to the cross. Now the authorities led by Caiaphas have determined that they are going to find a way to execute Jesus to protect the nation.

There is however one part of this story that kept grabbing my attention and I want to give you all something to pray and meditate over. For this we need to go back to the end of the story, to the cave with Lazarus inside. What I found myself considering is what cave imprisons you? Jesus speaks about those "who walk in the light do not stumble because they see the light that is coming into the world, but those who walk in darkness stumble because the light is not in them." The cave with the stone rolled over it is a place of darkness. Coming into the light being able to see is a central theme for Jesus that begs us to consider our blindness our imprisonment in ways that hold us back from being the beacons of light that God, Christ and the Holy Spirit are calling us to be

Here is a meditation for you for this week that is in two parts. First what imprisons you in a metaphorical tomb. What keeps you in darkness or blocks you from walking in the light. Imagine yourself in that tomb like Lazarus, bound up lying in the dark. Then imagine that you hear Jesus call you by name to come out so that you can be unbound and walk in the light.

Then take some time and consider who you have put into a tomb by what you have said or done? Whose light have you extinguished even if by accident or neglect.

I want to close with a psalm that started me down this path today. This is written by Steve Garnaas-Holmes a pastor who sends out daily poems or psalms.

Come out, you who have been entombed
in silence, in fear, in condemnation, come out!
Come out to the one who loves you.
You who are afraid for your life,
who are afraid of your life,
you who are ashamed,
you who have been bound,
come out into your own life!
You who have been told you're unworthy,

you who are afraid of failing,
come out into your whole life.
You who are wounded and grieving,
who are hopeless or depressed,
you who wonder if you'll ever live deeply,
come out into life's fullness.
You who are well defended in your fortresses,
in armor, in costumes,
come out.
Gays and abuse victims,
transgender and shy,
gifted and doubtful,
queer and other,
you can come out.
Come out of your closets,
out of hiding, out of exile,
out of the wilderness.
You have a place, and the tomb is not it.
The One Who Weeps for You calls to you.
You are wanted.
You are mourned.
Come out.
And you who have rolled the great stones
over other people's lives,
roll them back.
Stand aside. Never mind the stench.
Call to them.
Open your arms.
Unbind them.
Let them go.

The Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes