

Sermon on 5 Lent A: John 11:1-6, 17-44.

Preached at Custer Lutheran Fellowship, 3-9-2008, by Pastor David Van Kley

Three Faces of Faith

The words that haunt me in this long passage are the last ones I read: after Jesus had summoned the dead man, Lazarus, from the grave, he said to bystanders, “Unbind him and let him go!” If Jesus could raise Lazarus from the dead, why didn’t he just go ahead and remove the grave clothes at the same time? When we hear of Jesus’ own resurrection in just two weeks, John will tell us that the grave linens were left **inside** the tomb, with the head cloth rolled up in a corner by itself. Why is it different here?

Besides, it’s a strange way to end the story! I’d like to hear Lazarus stammering his thanks, see him holding his sisters in a tearful embrace! It’s almost as if John leaves the story unfinished. Why?

Hold that thought for a moment, because we have other, more obvious questions. For example, when Jesus receives the news that his dear friend is gravely ill, he decides, **intentionally**, to stay away for two days. Why? The fact isn’t lost on the sisters, Martha and Mary! When Jesus finally shows up too late, their questions take the form of an accusation, “If you had been here, our brother would not have died!” I mean, “where **were** you?” Even the neighbors wonder. “Couldn’t the one who opened the eyes of a blind man have kept this man from dying?”

These are the questions of **grief**. Why do bad things happen to good people? If the world is ruled by a God of love of justice, why does this God allow suffering and injustice? Where is God? If there is a God, does God care?

Jesus wades right into this ocean of questions. By meeting Martha and summoning Mary, he accepts both of their ways of mourning: Martha’s direct, active approach, Mary’s quiet, “to herself” approach. At the graveside, Jesus himself is overcome with emotion. He was “greatly disturbed,” the text says—“deeply moved.” In Greek, the words mean—literally—he **shuddered** from head to toe. Then the shortest verse in the Bible: “Jesus **wept**.”

In this way, Jesus invites us to do our grief work. Our culture discourages public displays of mourning. Weeping is interpreted as a sign of weakness. We are expected to get over our losses in a hurry, go back to work in a few days or at most, a few weeks, busy ourselves with the tasks of life, keep our minds off of our sadness. We are not supposed to stand there by the grave and weep. Yet this is what Jesus did. Maybe that’s one reason he delayed coming when the sisters first called him.

If you are grieving on this day, Jesus invites you to be honest about it. Do not be ashamed of your feelings, your hurt and anger. Share them, **ex-press** them, let them out. Grief expert Allen Wohlfeldt says that when we lose someone or something we value, we have a bowl full of feelings. When we mourn our loss, it’s like pouring out the bowl, so

that it does not overflow. Here, Jesus calls us to mourn.

The text gives rise to other questions. When John tells us that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, we cannot help but doubt. This was not a near-death experience: the man had been gone for four days. His body smelled like it. He was beyond CPR, way beyond. We live in a **disenchanted** world that demands scientific proof for miracles. We ask: how can this be?

But if we are limited to human solutions to human problems, we will often find ourselves bereft of hope. When wars drag on and terrorists detonate themselves. When we hear dire predictions about the environment. When our relationships with certain people are conflicted. When the doctor diagnoses stage three cancer. We can see no way through the crisis.

But this text declares to us that there is **no such thing** as a hopeless situation! Where there is no way, God can make a way. With God, nothing will be impossible!

I remember one of my seminary professors telling us pastoral students, “The first time the phone rings and you are summoned to the hospital to meet a grieving family, you will believe in the resurrection of the dead.” That is true. As Christians, we mourn, Paul says, but “not as others do who have no hope.” Jesus’ words, “I am the resurrection and the life” pierce our armored minds, our calloused hearts.

While we were in Colombia, we met a young woman about to receive her medical degree. Now that is an amazing accomplishment for anyone! But this woman was from the community of the displaced, several million people living in shacks on the mountainsides of Bogotá, where violence and hunger and poor sanitation are the rule, where people scratch out a living on \$10 per week, in a country where there is almost no social or economic mobility. How could she become a doctor? Where there was no way, God made a way!

“Faith seeks understanding,” theologians say, but it is also true that understanding can take you only so far. Finally, faith must leap beyond understanding and cling to the One who makes a way where there is no way, the One who is resurrection and life.

Then, we are left with the words: “unbind him and let him go.” Why such a strange ending? Because the God of resurrection leaves something for **us** to do. And note: it is not something we can do for **ourselves!** We are called to unwrap the grave-cloths that bind others. And to allow others to unwrap the grave-cloths that bind us. Jesus left us with something to do because the risen Lord lives in and among **us**: we are the body of Christ!

Every week, the miracle of forgiveness is proclaimed here at the beginning of worship. Where there is no way, God makes a way. But there remains something for **us**

to do. It is not possible for someone who has hurt us to believe in God's forgiveness if we do not forgive and accept her. It is not possible to accept God's forgiveness if we do not allow others to forgive and accept us.

A person suffering from addiction to alcohol may finally see the dynamics of their addiction and repent. Where there is no hope, God grants hope. But that hope will not be realized unless we support that person in his recovery and hold him accountable. And of course, he must also allow us to do that!

The woman I referred to from Colombia has worked long and hard to obtain that degree. God gave her the motivation, the intelligence, the perseverance. But it was also possible only because people like you contributed money over the years through the Colombian Scholarship Fund. Our pennies and quarters and dollars were the unbinding she needed to leave the tomb of poverty. One thousand people have gone to school in Colombia over these 18 years because people in South Dakota and Minnesota have heard God's command: unbind them and let them go!

And then, there is the situation we find ourselves in because of Arlene and I have decided to accept a call in northern Michigan. I don't want to make a bigger deal out of this than it is. But I know that it is a source of grief to many of you, even as it has been for us. The text invites you to share your feelings, your sadness and hurt, even anger if you feel that we are abandoning you. Jesus gives us permission to do that. Jesus also gives us permission to hope. Remember: God will raise up a new person to lead here! CLF will be OK, Arlene and I will be OK, Kent will be OK. God is the Christ of Easter, the resurrection and the life. And then, Jesus calls us to "unbind them and let them go." We will need each other in these months ahead. I will need you to unbind me and let me go. I will need you to love me and send me off to serve faithfully in another place. I cannot do this for myself. And you will need Arlene and I to help unbind you, because some of the knots between us are awfully tight after 9 years. It will take time to loosen them. It will be up to us to help you.

Well, I've said a lot about this long passage, but much more could be said. It's like Mt. Rushmore before Borglum got a hold of it. There were many faces hidden inside the mountain: he showed us four of them. The three faces of faith that have emerged from this text today are: **mourning, hope, and unbinding**. Amen.