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All Saint's Day

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UNBINDING LAZARUS

When Lazarus walks out of the tomb, I imagine the crowd gasping with astonishment and pulling back in fear. A startling glimpse of another reality clobbers them. Ever practical, Lazarus' sister, Martha had warned, "Lord, by now there is a stench, for he has been dead four days."

Jesus had been informed that his friend, Lazarus, was dying. But then he delays by two days going to Bethany where Lazarus and his two sisters, Martha and Mary, live. Jewish belief held that the spirit of the deceased stayed near the body for three days. To do anything in its vicinity would disturb it. Perhaps to heighten the miracle, the gospel writer wants us to know that after four days Lazarus is completely dead. Aware of this, I would not necessarily take literally the events of this miracle story, but rather, seek to plumb its deeper meaning.

The resuscitation of Lazarus is the final and climactic sign in the gospel of John that precipitates Jesus' arrest and trial. The resuscitation of Lazarus is the final straw for the Temple authorities. What Jesus does is blasphemous, they believe, because only God can raise the dead, and Jesus cannot be God in their minds.

As is often true with John's Gospel, there are several levels of meaning in today's story, which some call a parable. It is a good story for All Saints Day because it points to the promise of

resurrection and eternal life for all the saints. We note, however, that Lazarus is resuscitated not resurrected. Lazarus will die a second time. Jesus will not.

During our lifetimes we experience small and dramatic spiritual deaths. Losses, disappointments, betrayals, and our sins may lead us to dark tombs. The Lazarus story implicitly insists that God longs for us to come out of whatever tombs we are stuck in and to move back into the light of day, and back into community. In Lazarus' case, the community includes family, friends, Bethany neighbors, Jesus and his disciples. Lazarus does not leave the tomb on his own. He needs the support of others to roll away the stone that seals it and to remove the cloths that bind him. But he does move his own feet and take his own first steps out of the cave. Even stupendous healings involve human effort and participation.

There is something new going on in Jesus. At one point in today's gospel, he reveals his full humanity through his empathy and identification with suffering. When he sees Mary and others weeping, he is "greatly disturbed and deeply moved". He weeps with them. Not just a gentle tear trickling down his cheek, but he sobs. His are cries of compassion for a bewildered and grief-stricken community. We know what is like to see someone else's tears and be moved to weep with them. So we see Jesus as one of us, and so he is.

Next he reveals another aspect of himself, more god-like and numinous. If we insist on a literal interpretation of the story we miss its deeper meaning; that, in calling forth Lazarus, Jesus dramatizes the victory of love over death and the promise of everlasting life. On All Saints Day, we pray for loved ones no longer with us. We offer these prayers because they live in our hearts and memories.

We hope and believe, however inarticulately, that they live in a peaceful realm which lies beyond our rational grasp.

One pastor writes of having a number of conversations with people who have had near death experiences. He states that although many wish to stay on the other side because of its peace and beauty, they return because of a sense of responsibility to loved ones in this life. This witness of those who have been there and back invites us to have faith in things we may not have yet seen, belief in things beyond reason. If the metric for our faith is limited to a narrow, rational grasp of our own experiences we will miss out.

“Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus come out!’ 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.’” This is the climax of the miracle. While Lazarus himself and his friends are participants, Jesus is the major force behind Lazarus’ resuscitation.

The phrase “coming out” has been used over the last few decades to describe gay and lesbian individuals taking the first steps out of the tombs of rejection and persecution into the light of day. These steps are long and sometimes dangerous and often require much courage. Many have lost their jobs, been beaten, or even killed for being themselves. When the movement of unbinding that began in the 70s is complete, perhaps the phrase, “coming out” will happily fall into oblivion.

Unbind him, let him go. We might see in Jesus a new Moses whose God told him to “Let my people go.” Free the people of

Israel from the shackles of slavery and degradation in Egypt. Free my Lazarus. Free you and me. From what tomb do we need to come out? From what chains do we need to be unbound?

I recently read *The Night of the Gun*, a NY Times Bestseller by David Carr. In this memoir, Carr reviews his long nightmare of addiction to alcohol and drugs (“booze and dope”). For more than a decade he was entombed in chaos and bound by an addiction that had near complete control of his life. After five long stints in rehab facilities he is finally unbound and freed. His love for his twin daughters brings him out into the bright light of day. Although he will have relapse after eleven years of sobriety, he finds the help he needs once again. His gutsy and honest pursuit of his own difficult truth inspires the reader to examine what binds him or her.

What entombs you and me? Guilt, fear of death? Are we bound by wounds received a long time ago? Unhealed places? It is not easy to take first steps into the light as Lazarus did. Perhaps some are bound by a family secret or shame.

In the film, “Traces of the Trade: A story from the Deep North”, some members of a large family set out on a journey of discovery and healing into the distant shadows of one of their forbearers. Their common ancestor of Bristol, Rhode Island was one of the most prosperous slave traders of pre-Colonial New England. These explorers encounter protectors of family myths who want to hide the shameful aspects of the past. They travel to Ghana to the slave-holds where the ships picked up their human cargo and sailed to the West Indies. This is a story of a small group of courageous descendants who seek to be unbound from a shameful legacy and discern how they might respond to what they discover. We will be showing “*Traces of the Trade*” this Tuesday at 4:00 in the lower Parish Hall.

There are probably things that bind us of which we are not aware. Skeletons in the closet. I suspect we all have them, perhaps in closets we have forgotten about. Just as Lazarus is assisted by his neighbors in the rolling away of the stone and in his unbinding, we too should not go it alone. Because it is easy to get overly attached to whatever binds us, we need all the courage and spiritual resources available.

The Celts describe this time of year and the observance of All Saints Day as a “thin time”, when the normal boundaries between the temporal and eternal, between heaven and earth, are pulled back, and when the spirits of the living almost touch the souls of their beloved departed. In the reading from The Revelation of John, the author has a vision of this near fusion of the quick and the dead.

“I saw a new heaven and a new earth; ... And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven...’See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; and they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death will be no more.”

“And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’”

That’s what Jesus was and is about ... disrupting our tombs, challenging our worldviews, healing and making all things new. Surely, the people of Bethany had never imagined anything like what they saw on that amazing day. We can only imagine how Lazarus himself was changed.

John 11:32-44

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."

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus 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." ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I 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." ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The 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."