

The Unbinding of Lazarus

7 – Life Is a Miracle – Miracles in John

John 12:12-16

Psalm 24

John 11:1-44

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Palm – Passion Sunday

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“When he had said this, he cried with aloud 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.’ ” John 11:43-44

Standing on a London street corner, G.K. Chesterton the renowned British writer was approached by a reporter, who said, “Sir, I understand you recently became a Christian. May I ask you a question?” “Certainly,” replied Chesterton. “If the risen Christ suddenly appeared at this very moment and stood behind you, what would you do?” Chesterton looked the reporter squarely in the eye and said, “He is.”ⁱ

He is with us still! That is our Good News. He is – and what will we do?

Here is what Jesus does.

Standing at the house of death, a massive stone tomb going down into subterranean caverns beneath the earth’s surface, Jesus commands life. In this final sign, pointing not to Lazarus but to Jesus himself and his own coming resurrection and life, Jesus orders the stone of death rolled back. Putrid odors of four-day-old flesh, decaying amid hot dry airless depths of a Middle Eastern tomb, come wafting out, causing many to gag and cover their faces. At the command of Jesus this lifeless spice-laden, tightly wrapped corpse comes to life and climbs, obedient to his Lord and Master, to the tomb’s entrance, a body bound, decaying, “He stinketh,” says The King James Version. (There is a reason we bury the dead!) And a command telling us what we are to do.

This eleventh chapter of John has been called “The Central Chapter.” It is central literally, 11 out of 21, 10 before, 10 after, right in the middle of the book. It is central in terms of presenting this most comprehensive miracle prefiguring Jesus’ own coming great miracle. It is central in terms of being the decisive turning-point. In the next chapter Jesus will enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey to shouts of “Hosanna!” welcomed precisely because Jesus had performed this sign. This last week of his life will fill fully the last half of John’s book. It is a massive central chapter with a massive central message, which is this: resurrection and life is miracle, transcending time and space, experienced solely in Jesus Christ our Lord through our belief in him.

Do you believe this? “Lazarus come out!”

In this most dramatic of the seven miraculous signs in John’s Gospel, Jesus commands his friend to come forth and receive back his life. Before them stands the tightly wrapped-in-grave-clothes, once dead, now pulsating with life, body of their friend, “his

hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth.”ⁱⁱ Then this clear word for them, for us, this word with which we begin, and upon which we focus our Palm – Passion Sunday reflections, “**Unbind him, and let him go.**”ⁱⁱⁱ

This is what we are to do. This is the call to every one of us, as we stand and cheer Jesus on this glorious day opening his final week. “**Unbind him, unbind her, and let them go.**” It is not sufficient to cheer from the sidelines. We must walk bravely with Jesus, all the way down to the depths, which we will do this week, reaching the lowest point on Good Friday; then all the way back up to the heights, which we will do next Sunday on Easter Day. Walk with Jesus along this earthly journey and unbind those who, like Lazarus, are trapped in the icy grip of death.

All those who are tied up and tied down, caught in some vicious web of destructiveness, all those caught in some subtle addiction, all those caught in some relational cul-de-sac from which the joy in life has gone out, all those caught in some health or vocational struggle from which they see no release - **Unbind them, and let them go!** You the Community of Jesus, you the happy wavers of palms, go all the way experience what you can of his Passion and the depths of his love, and then **unbind others who are bound.**

The central text of Judaism which comes round each year on the High Holy Day of Yom Kippur is the story of the binding of Isaac. How Abraham is commanded to take his own son, tie him down and offer him up in sacrifice. In terror Abraham obeys, confident that somehow God will provide. And with knife in hand, raised and ready, God stills Abraham’s arm from harming his son Isaac. God provides a ram caught in the thicket. Now in sparing all his sons and daughters, God will provide the great once-and-for-all time sacrificial Lamb of his own Son. That is what is unfolding as this week begins. Jesus is bound that we may be unbound and released.

I love Palm Sunday, with all the vigor and hope and joy it offers as Jesus comes to the City in triumph, a great peoples’ parade, riding, peacefully into the cross-hairs of danger. Hopes are raised about what he will do for them. They say he worked miracles. John says particularly - he turned water into wine at a wedding. He healed a nobleman’s son. He restored vigor to a lame man at a pool. He fed five thousand. He walked on water. He gave new eyes to a man born blind. Then this seventh and most dramatic miracle of them all, he restored his dead friend Lazarus to life.

Only John, of the four evangelists tells us this is the reason the crowd on Palm Sunday is so excited about Jesus’ appearance as Word rippled from tent to tent and campfire to campfire among the pilgrims gathered around the City for the Passover Festival. In a transitional passage between the account of Lazarus’ raising and this Palm Sunday Parade, John tells us of the previous Saturday night when Jesus was having dinner at the home of Mary and Martha. And Lazarus, raised from the dead, alive again, is there at dinner with them too, welcomed back as part of the family. Lazarus was one of those at the table with him,” John tells us matter-of-factly. An intimate moment for

Jesus and his friends. Lazarus, now washed up, clothed in some fresh linen robe, flesh restored, is relaxing at table with them. John says,

“When the great crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.”^{iv}

You see, Lazarus is the reason for all the excitement about Jesus on Palm Sunday. But back up, in this Gospel Jesus circles in and out of Jerusalem at least three times. With anger against Jesus growing among the Jerusalem officials after he had healed the blind man, and because his hour has not yet come, Jesus leaves the City again and withdraws to the wilderness regions on the other side of the Jordan, near where John had been baptizing, for quiet and rest and safety.

Mary and Martha, get word to Jesus that his friend, their brother Lazarus, is sick. “Lord the one whom you love is ill.” Jesus responds, not by rushing back to the Jerusalem suburb of Bethany, but with a little philosophical statement, about how this is a sign of something else. “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.”^v Curiously, Jesus waits another two days before setting off.

He is being very deliberate now. At the Cana wedding he had told his mother when she asked him to do something about the wine, “My time has not yet come.” Throughout, Jesus is in control of his time and his actions. All that will unfold in the week ahead does not come because he has been backed into a corner or found himself up against a wall. Jesus deliberately decides when the time is right for all that takes place. The miracle with Lazarus will not simply, as do the earlier signs, “manifest his glory.” This final miracle sign will actually glorify the Son of God through it. So Jesus waits.

When he finally tells his disciples, “Let us go to Judea again,” they fearfully react. “The Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?”^{vi} Telling them that Lazarus his friend has not only been lying sick but has actually now died, Jesus softens the blow by saying, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” The simple disciples then say, well if he has fallen asleep he will awaken and everything will be all right. Jesus tells them bluntly, “Lazarus is dead.” And death pervades, as they approach Bethany and discover Lazarus has been in the tomb four days already.

Try as we might, hard as our death-denying, death-hiding culture now does, there is no way to sweeten death. It is ugly. It is harsh. It is cold. It is, well, lifeless. One Sunday night in Bowling Green, Kentucky we were completing a dinner program at the church when word came from the neighbor of a member who had not been seen outside of her apartment since Thursday, that Millie had been found dead. I rushed over. I have been privileged to be with a number of people upon and sometimes immediately after

their death. But never before had I come upon a bloated corpse lying in a nightgown on the floor near her bed four days after death. It was a stark, offensive, noxious sight. Death is horrible.

Even so, both sisters recognize that with Jesus' presence, even now things may yet be different. Martha – the practical sister, laments that if he had been there earlier her brother would not have died. Quite a statement of trust there. “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him,” she adds.

Jesus promises her brother will rise again in the resurrection. And she gives a stock Jewish Sunday School answer, yes of course at the last day, when all is said and done, he will be raised. Jesus, however, transforms that traditional vague understanding and makes it personal and immediate in himself, telling her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”^{vii}

And Martha professes her faith, every bit the same as this group of young people will profess their faith this morning, every bit the same as his followers throughout the centuries have done, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”^{viii}

The march to the house of death continues, as Jesus makes his untimely way with his disciples and the gathered friends. Sister Mary greets him as he comes, and she too expresses belief that if Jesus had arrived earlier he could have prevented Lazarus' death. These two sisters have immense faith in their friend.

All this grief and sorrow, everyone weeping deeply affects him. Jesus is greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. And “Jesus wept,” the shortest, most poignant verse in the Bible. Jesus weeps for his friend Lazarus, this family and their friends, yes. But Jesus weeps for so much more. Jesus weeps for a world caught up in the patterns of death, a world that does not know the things that make for peace, a world that again and again repeats cycles of sin and violence, a world where teenagers and young parents die suddenly, a world that slays its best and brightest, its liberators and its truth speakers- its Gandhi, Kennedy, King, Sadat, Rabin, and almost slain, Reagan and Pope John Paul 2. Jesus weeps for us who read his teaching and claim his Lordship, and yet do not break free of the grave clothes, wound tightly, that bind us.

William James the philosopher, in an address at Columbia University said once that our modern age may be characterized by one German word, the word, “Zerishensheit,” which means “torn-apartness.”

That Jesus weeps for them that day and for us, tells us this day we have no remote vague God far off in the heavens, but one who came among us, knows us intimately inside and out, and is willing to take upon himself the suffering of our torn-apartness that belongs to us. “With his stripes we are healed.”

So Jesus stands there in the cemetery, before the stone cold tomb, and commands, “Lazarus, come out!” Some smirked. Others shook their heads. But Jesus has not lost his mind in grief. Jesus has found his voice in divine power. Shattering the boundary between life and death he reaches across and by his command pulls Lazarus back, back to life. At the creation God spoke the universe into being. At the Tomb Jesus spoke death into life!

The command, for us as we enter this awesome mysterious week of weeks, is “**unbind him and unbind her and let them go.**” There is someone you know, isn’t there, who needs your help to be released from the grave-wrappings that are binding them? It is not your role to fix them, not your place to be a little god to them. Not your job to resurrect them. God takes care of the life-giving. But will you release them and receive them back once God has done his part?

“Unbind him or her and let them go.” That is our task, as Jesus continues his task, his destiny, his hour now come, his journey into the vortex of evil, his confrontation with the darkest blackest depths of hell itself, enacted through the official engines of religion and the state. Only Jesus, doing what he will do, can bring about our salvation. Only the reconciling love of God in Jesus stands between us and chaos, insanity and absurdity. Only Jesus can command life out of death for another. Only Jesus will himself, once and for all, pass through the doorway of death and win.

“His cross will teach us that God’s love does not do away with conflict, or suffering, or tragedy. His cross is the thing that makes it possible to bear it, to see it, to share in it, to understand it, and to pass through it. That is the truth of the gospel. That is the essence of the Passion.”^{ix}

Jesus will not flinch now from his cross. He will bear the cold spot for us. Meanwhile, Jesus says, “**unbind him, unbind her, and let them go.**”

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” Amen.”^x

ⁱ Brennan Manning, Abba’s Child, p. 99.

ⁱⁱ John 11:44.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 11:44.

^{iv} John 11:9-11.

^v John 11:4.

^{vi} John 11:8.

^{vii} John 11:25-26.

^{viii} John 11:27.

^{ix} Peter Gomes, Sermons, Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living, p. 70.

^x John 20:30-31