

John 11: 38-44, Romans 8: 6-11

Loosing Lazarus

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As we draw near with Jesus to Jerusalem, preparing once again in the coming days to retell the story of what happened there all those centuries ago, we pause at the village of Bethany, near the city, where Jesus' dear friend Lazarus lies mouldering in a tomb. And Jesus, moved with compassion, raises him.

I wonder what it must be like to be Lazarus, to die and to be brought back. It's not uncommon to hear of people who have had after death experiences. They speak of seeing light and feeling great peace and they tell of not wanting to come back. Well, who knows what Lazarus saw or whether he wished to return. But we might also wonder what effect dying and returning might have had on him. The playwright Eugene O'Neill has a play called Lazarus entitled 'Lazarus Laughed'. In the play as Lazarus' grave-cloths are unwound he begins to laugh, a soft, gentle laugh. Lazarus laughs because he no longer fears death, and the house in Bethany where he lives becomes known as 'The House of Laughter', and soon there is singing and dancing resounding from it. And people in the village soon catch the spirit and they begin living more generously and humanely with one another. Of course, eventually the authorities, the powers that be, cannot stand such laughter. They are intimidated by this loosening of the grip of death by which they rule and Lazarus is arrested and eventually taken before the emperor. But Lazarus has lost his fear and nothing, even death, can silence his laughter. It's as if something of heaven's glory has been stolen and carried back as contraband and now brings joy and enriches life here.

Of course, Lazarus' raising is only temporary. He will die again. This is not like Jesus' resurrection which is once and for all. This is only resuscitation, a temporary reprieve. So keep a hold of those grave clothes. Store those grave clothes away. They will be needed again.

First, however, the grave-cloths must be removed. As he emerges from the tomb, Lazarus is alive but constrained, those bindings wrapped tight around him. And the climax of this story is not actually the raising of Lazarus. The climax is the unbinding and it is this part of the story that

I want to focus in on. For I would like to suggest that Lazarus provides us with one image of the Christian life, a picture of what it means to be a Christian.

Think of it this way. Here is this man who has been raised by Christ. But now as he lives again he awaits another death and a fuller glory when he will be raised once and for all, never to die again. Meanwhile, however, he is alive but bound. And so also with us. Our baptism, after all, speaks of us dying and being raised to new life, united with the risen Christ. This is what Paul is talking about in our reading from Romans 8: the Spirit of him who raised Christ from the dead has raised us up to new life. As the great Scottish churchman George McLeod used to put it, the undertakers have been for us. We have died and been buried with Christ and raised to new life. But like Lazarus, we must die again to enter a fuller glory. And meantime we live but we are bound, still wrapped in the trappings of death.

This surely is the great tension of the Christian life: we are raised, and yet bound, gripped by the things that still constrain us and deny us fullness of life. I wonder, what are the things that bind your life? What are the wrappings and trappings of death that constrain you and squeeze life out of you? There are the trappings of sin because though risen with Christ sin has not ceased its hold. But everything that diminishes us and demeans us as children of God are our grave-cloths. And there are the grave-cloths that continue to bind the lives of people everywhere: crippling injustice and senseless acts of terror and the plight of refugees... And here is insight into the nature of sin and what it does to us. It binds us.

The climax of this story is not therefore the raising of Lazarus but the loosing of Lazarus and those words of Jesus, 'Unbind him and let him go.' But it's interesting, isn't it, that Jesus does not unbind Lazarus. He raises him but now he commands others to unbind him. He calls Lazarus out of the tomb, but then hands him over to others. 'Unbind him and let him go.' And that is the climax of the incident as responsibility for unbinding is given to the community.

Here is our place in this story. Jesus entrusts us with the responsibility of unbinding grave-clothes. And what would the church be like if were to take that as an image for our life together and for our

mission to the world? Loosing, letting go. Imagine a community where we trust one another to help release us from the bonds that grip us? Who knows? We might even become The House of Laughter. Amen.

Holy, loving God,
All glory and praise and honour be to you,
sovereign, saving God,
source and goal of our lives and of the world.
We praise you living God,
forever free, unbounded and unbound,
free in your loving and in your giving
and in your coming amongst us in Jesus Christ.
And you have created us to be free,
free to live well and free to serve you
and one another, free for life.
Yet God we acknowledge
that we have forfeited our freedom.
In turning from you
We have become bound,
captive to powers and forces that constrain us
and squeeze life out of us.
Loving God, unbind us, we pray.
Loosen the bonds that hold us:
liberate us from our guilt and shame;
release us from the grip of the past that clings to us.

O God,
We praise you for Jesus who calls us out of the
tombs which we have made for ourselves,
unwinding the gave-clothes that ensnare us.
Teach us to live the life of the redeemed.
In Jesus' name and in his words
we pray together, saying...