

Rev. Lisa Schrott  
March 26, 2023  
John 11:1-4, 32-44  
*Unbound*

This morning is the last Sunday of Lent – next week is Palm or Passion Sunday – our entrance into Holy Week. The traditional passage of scripture for this Sunday is the resurrection of Lazarus, a story that foretells Jesus’ own resurrection on what we celebrate as Easter. Hear now these words from the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John.

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” But when Jesus heard it, he said, “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.” Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, Jesus stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

The story continues with dialogue between Jesus and the disciples about when they should travel to Bethany – located in Judea near Jerusalem. The disciples are fearful of their safety, reminding Jesus that the authorities were trying to stone him. Then Jesus tells the disciples that Lazarus is now dead and he must go to him. Jesus and the disciples travel to Bethany, and when Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. The time span of four days is an important detail. The traditional belief in that era was that the soul lingered around the body for three days after death; by the fourth day, it was thought, the soul had left the corpse behind for good.<sup>1</sup> So when Jesus arrived in Bethany Lazarus was decidedly dead – and his sister Martha questions Jesus as to why he did not arrive in time to heal Lazarus. We pick up the story with the arrival of Lazarus’ sister Mary in verse 32:

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.” When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus 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.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for

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<sup>1</sup> From SALT Commentary. Available online at <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/3/24/glorious-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-5>

having heard me. I 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.” When he had said this, he 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 (the crowds), “Unbind him, and let him go.” **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

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In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

So opens the Gospel of John. What has come into being through the Word was – is – life. At the heart of the Gospel message in John is life – abundant life, eternal life, life that is the light of all people. In a part of the passage I did not read, we hear Jesus’ proclamation about his resurrection. Jesus says to Lazarus’ sister Martha, “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.” This is the part of John chapter 11 that is often quoted, that we share in memorial services, one of the seven “I am” statements declaring Jesus’ identity. Hope springs from this assurance of the resurrection. Yet I also think there is a richness in this passage that speaks to us in other ways. This story speaks to our need to grieve and mourn and weep and be angry and question, all so very human emotions. We see that whole range on display for us here. And we see how Jesus responds to these emotions.

As one commentator has noted, “John’s Gospel is organized around seven astounding “signs” that reveal Jesus’ identity and mission. The turning of water into wine is the first of these signs — and this week’s reading, the raising of Lazarus, is the seventh. John’s name for these events — “signs” — points to their purpose: they’re supposed to catch our attention (even catch our breath!), drawing us toward life with and in God ... the seven “signs” in John (and the eighth, Jesus’ resurrection) point beyond themselves to even bigger, deeper realities about who Jesus is and what he’s all about. Faith, we might say, is a pair of glasses through which we can see dimensions of God’s glory we might otherwise miss”<sup>2</sup> without these signs.

Are we wearing these glasses of faith? Do we see God’s glory shining in our world? Or are we bound by the despair we see around us? Can we affirm life – can we live in the light of Jesus’ words, “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.”? As author and Presbyterian pastor Michael Lindvall writes, “Such a ringing affirmation of life, both physical and spiritual, is a word that aches to be spoken in a world grown inured to its own cultures of death.” He writes about deaths in distant wars, mass shootings, and an unprecedented opioid addiction crisis, and

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<sup>2</sup> From SALT Commentary. Available online at <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/3/24/glorious-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-5>

concludes by saying, “All summed up, such cultural indifference to death stands in starkest contrast to Jesus’ defiance of death and insistence on life, the theme most central to this story.”<sup>3</sup>

Recently I have been seeing the term “deaths of despair” exploding in the media. This term, coined a few years back by Princeton University economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton, refers to deaths from drug overdoses, liver disease from alcohol use, and suicide.<sup>4</sup> Journalist Beth Macy fleshes out these deaths of despair related to opioid drug use in her books *Dopesick* (which was made into a series streamed on Hulu) and *Raising Lazarus: Hope, Justice, and the Future of America's Overdose Crisis*. In this latter book she decries that “An American now dies a death of despair – from opioids, alcohol or suicide – every two and half minutes.”<sup>5</sup> Think about that – during our approximately hour long service this morning, that translates to 24 people in our country dying a death of despair.

And like Martha and Mary in our scripture this morning we ask “Why?” Jesus’ got some hard questions– even accusations – from Martha, Mary and the crowds. Could Jesus not have prevented all this horrible pain and heartache? Why did he not intervene earlier? It’s too late now. Jesus cured other people – why not Lazarus? Questions we ourselves might ask – all of the whys – why him, why her, why now, why this disease, why didn’t the treatment or rehab work? What could I have done to prevent this?

And how does Jesus respond? He is not angry or defensive. He does not give a superficial reason, nor a deep theological response. No Jesus, in all his humanity, weeps, as we will hear the choir sing this morning. Jesus is our mirror to understanding God. And this passage helps us see we worship a God who recognizes our pain. We worship a God, who is not just up there in the sky somewhere floating in the clouds, removed from our lives, but a God who meets us and participates in our pain. We can pray to God because we know that God weeps when we weep.

God doesn't only empathize with our many pains and sorrows. God also acts, and calls us to act as well. Jesus wept with Mary and Martha, and then he raised Lazarus from the dead. And Jesus’ final act in this passage is to command the crowds to unbind Lazarus – for the cloths that held him together in death to be removed and for him to be freed. You see Lazarus was not restored to life until he became unbound.

This language of releasing the confining bonds of death speaks to me on a number of levels. When I think about the “deaths of despair”, especially those involving opioids, it brings me back to my days as researcher studying the effects of opioid drugs like oxycodone, the active ingredient in Oxycontin. Oxycodone elicits its effects by binding to opioid receptors in the brain,

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<sup>3</sup> Michael L. Lindvall, John 11:1-45. Commentary 2. Connecting the Reading with the Word. *Connections. A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. Westminster John Knox Press. 2018, p107.

<sup>4</sup> Clark Merrefeld. ‘Deaths of despair’: Research on opioid crisis origins and the link between minimum wages and suicide reduction. *The Journalist's Resource*. January 19, 2022. Available online at <https://journalistsresource.org/economics/deaths-of-despair-opioid-minimum-wage-suicide/>

<sup>5</sup> Beth Macy. *Raising Lazarus: Hope, Justice, and the Future of America's Overdose Crisis*. Little, Brown and Company, 2022, p/120

setting off a cascade of signaling pathways that lead to the desired effects like pain relief and undesired effects like respiratory depression and physical dependence. Drugs vary in the degree to which they bind to a receptor, a concept known as affinity. If a drug binds very tightly, it can be hard to remove it from the receptor and counteract its effect. Fentanyl, the drug fueling much of the current opioid epidemic, has a very high affinity – it binds tightly to opioid receptors in the brain. This means that overdoses can easily happen and that it takes a lot of the counteracting drug, Narcan or naloxone, to reverse the effects of fentanyl. In an overdose situation, the unbinding of oxycodone or fentanyl is what restores life.

Being bound up – confined – restricted – unable to escape the grip - is language used to describe addiction to opioids or alcohol or cannabis or gambling or any of the myriad of entities that we abuse. In substance abuse disorders, life becomes smaller and smaller, with more focus and energy on attaining the substances that are binding. What may have given someone the sense of freedom initially, now becomes tight cloths restricting the ability to fully live. Through hard work and time, recovery – release from the bonds of addiction – can happen. The dead can come out of the tomb, be unbound, and life restored.

While we read this passage as Jesus commanding Lazarus to be unbound, there is some ambiguity. The last line of this passage says, “Jesus said to them, “Unbind him and let him go.” In many ways, I think we are all the “him” and that Jesus is commanding all of us to be unbound. Unbound from our expectations of what life should look like; what God should look like or how God should act. Unbound from what society or your neighbor or your family says is the right way to live. Unbound from the desire to be self-sufficient and independent and the fear that we will be a burden. Unbound from our smug self-righteousness and judgmental attitude of those who make different choices than we do. Unbound from the notion – the worry – that we have to achieve more, be more, try harder to receive God’s love and grace. That somehow we don’t deserve the living water, the bread of life, the cup of salvation offered by Jesus.

We need to be unbound. We need to ask, we need to beg, for the Holy Spirit to unbind us because when we are bound up, our eyes are closed to the pain and suffering in our world. We cannot reach out to offer a helping hand. We are not able to walk along side our neighbors as they flee oppression and seek dignity. We need to ask, we need to beg, for the Holy Spirit to unbind us. We need to be unbound because when we are bound up, our voices can no longer be heard through the layers of indifference, apathy, cowardice, fear, and bigotry that smother us. And as the Spirit unbinds us, we will be able to loosen the cloths on others, freeing them from the likelihood of deaths of despair and raising them to new life. Friends that is our call – to welcome the Spirit of unbinding in our own lives and to be the hands of unbinding in the lives of others. For as the author Beth Macy says as she ends her book on the overdose crisis in America, “Best not to give up too quickly on a neighbor. Best not to judge a stone too heavy to roll. Only by endeavoring to help in the face of so much suffering can we bear witness to the miracle of raising Lazarus.”<sup>6</sup> May it be so. Join me in prayer.

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p293.