

April 6, 2025  
Rev. Lisa Schrott  
Ezekiel 37:1-14 & John 11: 1-45  
*Faith In the Wilderness: Stuck & Withered*

We are closing in to the end of Lent - this morning is the fifth Sunday and 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 from the Gospel of John that foretells Jesus' own resurrection on what we celebrate as Easter.

A certain man, Lazarus, was ill. He was from Bethany and the brother of Mary and Martha. The sisters sent a message to Jesus to let him know that his dear friend was ill. Jesus received the message and though he cared deeply about Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, he did not travel to Bethany, saying: "This illness isn't fatal. It's for the glory of God so that God's Son can be glorified through it." Two days later Jesus told his disciples that it was time to go to Bethany. The disciples objected, as Bethany was near Jerusalem, reminding Jesus that the religious leaders wanted to stone him. Jesus was not afraid and told the disciples that their friend Lazarus is sleeping and that he was going to order Lazarus to wake up. As they sometimes did, the disciples did not understand exactly what Jesus meant. They thought if Lazarus was just sleeping, he would get well and they wouldn't need to make the trip. So Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died. For your sake, I'm glad I wasn't there so that you can believe. Let's go to him."

The disciples and Jesus traveled to Bethany and when they arrived, they found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Many had come to comfort Martha and Mary after their brother's death. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary remained in the house. We hear the rest of the story through a conversation between Martha and Jesus and then Mary and Jesus. ...

Martha: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died. Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you."

Jesus: "Your brother will rise again."

Martha: "I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day."

Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Martha, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, God's Son, the one who is coming into the world."

Narrator: After Martha said this, she went and spoke privately to her sister Mary.

Martha: "The teacher is here and he's calling for you."

Narrator: When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to Jesus. He hadn't entered the village but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When those who were comforting Mary in the house saw her get up quickly and leave, they followed her.

Mary: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died."

Narrator: When Jesus saw her crying and the others who had come with her crying also, he was deeply disturbed and troubled.

Jesus: "Where have you laid him?"

Narrator: "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to cry. And the crowds said, "See how much he loved him!" But some of them said, "He healed the eyes of the man born blind. Couldn't he have kept Lazarus from dying?" Jesus was deeply disturbed again when he came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone covered the entrance.

Jesus: "Remove the stone."

Martha: "Lord, the smell will be awful! He's been dead for four days."

Jesus: "Didn't I tell you that if you believe, you will see God's glory?"

Narrator: They removed the stone.

Jesus: "Father, thank you for hearing me. I know you always hear me. I say this for the benefit of the crowd standing here so that they will believe that you sent me. Lazarus, come out!"

Narrator: The dead man came out, his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth.

Jesus: "Untie him and let him go."

Martha: Many who came with Mary and saw what Jesus did believed in him.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God**

Something had changed for Martha and Mary. They were stuck. Someone they loved was ill. Someone they valued was about to be lost. They were about to mark time in a different way – that was then and this is now. I find myself doing that a lot lately – marking time as before and after some event – some event that changed my perspective on the fragility of life.

I was a college student when the Space Shuttle Challenger blew up. I watched the coverage in the lounge of the dining hall by the student mailroom. Space – the final frontier - was now a danger zone, not solely a realm of exploring the universe. Sept 11 changed how we travel – still to this day. The assassination of John Kennedy or Martin Luther King. The Vietnam War. The Persian Gulf War. The COVID-19 virus. October 7. The recent election. There was then and there is now.

Maybe for you it wasn't a cultural or societal marker. Maybe it was more like Martha and Mary – a diagnosis – an illness – a death or maybe another tragedy – a fire or storm, a lost job, the breakup of a relationship. There was then and there is now. Time was marked in a different way. No longer was life on a linear path – moving from one step to the next. There may be some curves along the way, but they were gentle ones that still allowed you to at least get a glimpse of what was ahead. Instead you were now mired in the muck. Not only unsure where the next step will take you, but unsure if you can even unstick your feet to take a step.

What did Martha and Mary do when they found themselves stuck and withering? They asked for help. They sent word to Jesus that their brother, who they loved and who Jesus loved, was ill. This wasn't a common cold. It was serious – serious enough to call Jesus to Bethany. As the disciples alluded, this was not a trivial request. We learn in Chapter 10 of John's Gospel that Jesus had just been in Jerusalem for the Festival of the Dedication. He was walking through the Temple area when he responded to a question about his identity by saying that he was the Messiah, that "the Father and I are one." The religious leaders took up stones against him, accusing him of blasphemy for making himself God. So Jesus had left Judea, the area around Jerusalem, crossing the Jordan River and remaining in that area until hearing from Mary and Martha.

It was not easy for Mary and Martha to ask Jesus for help, knowing that his life would be in danger if he came back to the area. It took courage to reach out, for they had many fears. They feared that the religious leaders might get wind of his visit and cause trouble. They feared that if something happened to Jesus while he was in Bethany, it would be their fault. Their biggest fear... that Jesus might not come and heal Lazarus and that their beloved brother would die. And that is what happens. Jesus delays his visit and Martha and Mary are stuck in the wilderness of waiting. And then they are stuck in the wilderness of mourning when Jesus fails to arrive in time and Lazarus dies.

When Jesus finally arrives in the village, he gets 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? 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 work, why this job loss, why did this person leave? 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.

Jesus is our mirror to understanding God. And this passage helps us understand 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 in the wilderness and participates in our pain. God doesn't only empathize with our many pains and sorrows. God also acts. Jesus wept with Mary and Martha, and then he raised Lazarus from the dead, which was his last “sign” before his own death and resurrection. Jesus final act in this passage was to command for Lazarus to be unbound — for the cloths that held him together in death to be removed and for him to be let go.

Lazarus is unbound and unstuck. And as Lazarus is unbound, Mary and Martha, and the crowds of people also begin the process unbinding, of becoming unstuck from their circumstances. You see unbinding is not an instantaneous process — it wasn't for Lazarus or his family or friends and it is not for any of us. It takes awhile. The big cloths are cut and the outer layer may fall away readily — arms and legs freed to walk, eyes uncovered. It may seem just like the days before, routine even or maybe busier with a different set of activities. But it doesn't take long for you realize that much of the binding remains. So more wraps are untied, more cloths cut away, more bindings undone. And at times it feels that you have always lived this way, and at other times this unboundness feels at funny and otherworldly. And again you realize there are those cloths and ties that are so firmly bound to you that they may never be loosed. They may stay with you always, tethering you. Getting unstuck is no easy process. It happens in fits and starts, with lulls and lags, and speed ups and ordinariness.

And 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.” I've been thinking a lot about this last command and wondering if Jesus might not have been directing some of this command to his disciples, including us. When Jesus told the disciples that it was time to go to Bethany they objected. They reminded Jesus that the religious leaders wanted to stone him. When Jesus told them that they must go now to “wake up” Lazarus, they rejected the request, saying that they didn't need to go because Lazarus would get well and wake-up. A third time Jesus tells them that they must go — now explaining that Lazarus has died.

The disciples were stuck in fear, afraid of what would happen to them and Jesus if they went to Jerusalem. They were stuck in fear of the authorities, of what those in power might say or do when they saw Jesus. They were stuck in a battle mindset, that the will of the religious leaders or the government officials would hold sway and that they, along with Jesus, would be crushed by the powers that be and their time following Jesus would become just a footnote in the bloody history of the ancient near east.

The disciples were living in a wilderness of fear. Now I am not saying that their fears were unjustified. There were legitimate fears as we will hear during Holy Week. There was reason to be concerned. And yet, Jesus tells them it is time to leave the safe space behind and show up. To show up for their friends. To show up for those who need healing. To show up for the vulnerable and the oppressed. To show up and face the authorities with the breath of the Holy Spirit carrying them. With their bones being brought back to life, no matter how dry and withered they are. To remember the words of Ezekiel told the people of Israel when they were afraid of being conquered: “Dry bones, hear the Lord’s word! The Lord God proclaims to these bones: I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again. I will put sinews on you, place flesh on you, and cover you with skin. When I put breath in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the Lord.”

And Jesus said: “Lazarus, come out! Untie him and let him go.” Let him go and proclaim that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. That whoever believes in him will live and will never die. Let him go and proclaim the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome the dust and debris and detritus that keeps us stuck and withering in fear. That keeps us repeating the words said to the prophet Ezekiel: “Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely finished.”

And Ezekiel says to them: “The Lord God proclaims: I’m opening your graves! I will raise you up from your graves ... I will put my breath in you, and you will live. I will plant you on your fertile land, and you will know that I am the Lord.” This is the promise we hear in the Hebrew scriptures and the Gospel writings when we ask for help, when we ask God to transform what appears to be hopeless – dead in the tomb for four days. The Lord will breathe the Holy Spirit into us, opening the places where we are stuck and withering, reviving places where our hope has died; unbinding us from our fears of what others will think or how others might respond; animating our very bones so that we might be soldiers on the battlefield of justice, remembering our charge to love God and love our neighbor. No questions asked. No excuses that our bones are too dry. Our spirits too withered. No excuses that our hope has perished. No excuses that the mud is too deep, the mountains too high, the valleys too low, the wilderness too desolate. For the Lord has promised to breathe life into our dry bones and Jesus has promised us that tomb will be opened and we will be unbound. May it be so. Join me in prayer.