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John 11: 38-45

*The Path to Repair and Restoration: Unbinding From the World's Priorities*

This morning is the fifth 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. I will summarize the beginning of the story from chapter 11 before I share the final verses.

Sisters Martha and Mary send word to Jesus that their brother, Lazarus, is deathly ill. Although Jesus is close to the family, he intentionally stays where he is for two additional days. He tells his disciples that the sickness will not end in permanent death, but is for the glory of God. 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." Jesus and the disciples travel to Bethany.

By the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus has been in the tomb for 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 that 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, saying, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. In response, Jesus declares: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die." Witnessing their grief and the community's sorrow, Jesus is deeply moved and weeps. We conclude the story with these words from verse 38-45:

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 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

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

feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Many of the Jewish religious leaders, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did believed in him. **This Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

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“Our age has come to expect satisfaction. We have grown up in an absolutely unique period when having and possessing and accomplishing have been real options. They have given us an illusion of fulfillment—and fulfillment now—as long as we are clever enough, quick enough, and pray or work hard enough for our goals or rewards.” These are words from Catholic priest and spirituality writer Father Richard Rohr from a Center for Action and Contemplation devotional in 2023.<sup>2</sup>

I heartily agree with Rohr’s thesis that we live in a world where we have an expectation of fulfillment and instant gratification, often insisting on compensation when our needs are not met. However, I am not so sure this is unique to our day and time. Maybe in degree, but throughout history people have had expectations of the way things should play out. In our scripture today, Martha had an expectation. She expected that Jesus, a friend to her, her sister Mary and brother Lazarus, would show up in time to heal Lazarus from his illness. After all, Jesus had healed many people throughout his ministry. Yet Martha’s expectation was not met. Her brother died. And Martha’s response was to call Jesus out for not showing up.

And how does Jesus respond? He is not angry or defensive. He does not give a superficial reason, nor a deep theological response. He didn’t give an excuse for why he was delayed – no road construction on the highway to Bethany, no waiting for the bad weather to clear, no long lines at the TSA check points. Instead Jesus pointed to a whole different level of reality, saying “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 response from Jesus is an oft-quoted scripture, 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. Jesus is asking Martha to look beyond what the world says and believe in something greater.

A bit later in the passage, Lazarus’ other sister, Mary likewise tells Jesus that if he had come sooner than her brother Lazarus would not have died. Again Jesus does not respond as one rooted in the world’s priorities would respond. No deflection, no anger, no excuses. No false bravado, no pretending that it didn’t matter, no putting on a brave face. Instead, Jesus, in all his humanity, was “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” scripture tells us. And Jesus wept.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Rohr. Surrendering to Our Soul Gift, January 13, 2023 online at <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/surrendering-to-our-soul-gift-2023-01-13/>

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.

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>3</sup> without these signs.

The question for us is what set of glasses are we wearing? The glasses of the world which bring into focus the priorities of the world or the glasses of our faith which sharpen our gaze on the priorities God has established. 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.

And unbinding is not 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 a while. The big cloths are cut and the outer layer may fall away readily – arms and legs freed to walk, eyes uncovered. Maybe your conscience is pricked just a bit. Maybe you answer the call to serve in a new way, like some of the church officers who will be ordained and/or installed this morning. 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 you aren’t sure if they can ever be loosed. Unbinding is no easy process. And it shouldn’t be. It happens in fits and starts, with lulls and lags, and speed ups and ordinariness. And unbinding is never really completed. At least not in our earthly life.

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

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

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.

Part of the work we do on the path to repair and restoration – our journey this Lenten season- is to be unbound from the world’s priorities, as we focus on God’s priorities. 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 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. May it be so. Join me in prayer.