

April 2nd, 2017: Lent 5: Cave



This morning's gospel is an emotional one, full of anxiousness and desperation, and then despair and mourning. We see Mary and Martha crying out for help in the face of illness and grief at the death of their beloved brother, we see the crowds gathered around weeping and mourning the loss of a friend, and we see Jesus, caring so deeply about Lazarus that he weeps at his death, yet still delaying his visit when his healing touch could have prevented it in the first place.

While Lazarus is the one who falls ill and dies, the story focuses more on Mary and Martha. When Jesus finally comes to their home, after Lazarus has died, Martha goes out to confront him, but Mary stays home. Martha tells Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (vs. 21). Jesus responds to Martha about the resurrection, and Martha says she knows that there will be a resurrection on the final day as other Jews believed, but Jesus replies that he is the resurrection and the life (vs. 25). Jesus uses Lazarus to show that eternal life is new life beginning NOW. When he calls Lazarus out of the tomb, he commands those nearby to unbind him and let him go (vs. 44). Death, which has a hold on us all, loses its power and is unbound with the resurrection.

Jesus is the resurrection and the life. While there are those who believe in life after death, Jesus declares the resurrection now. Jesus declares new life now. But so many of us do not live into it. We have trouble seeing the hope and promise of resurrection and newness of life because we're bound up in the now, the emotions and fears of our circumstances. We resonate with the emotions in our scripture this morning; the fear, disappointment, anger, and feelings of abandonment, resonate with how we feel at different times in life; times when hope seems lost, when despair takes hold and binds us, when we feel trapped in the cave, buried alongside our dreams for the future. As our scripture unfolds, we hear of various people who are bound, trapped in a circumstance or emotional state beyond their control.

- Lazarus was bound by death, entombed in a cave.
- His sisters were bound in their grief and sadness.
- Jesus' disciples were bound by fear and uncertainty.
- The crowds were bound by doubt and skepticism.

In today's miracle story, Jesus provides the opportunity to unbind each of them, to release them from that which limits, restricts, destroys, diminishes them... to the hope and possibilities of new life in and through Christ.

Hope is not only a life and death matter, hope is a life in death matter. Hope finds its greatest challenge, and shines its greatest light, when life stands in the face of death and affirms that in God, love and hope remain. Jesus, stricken with a grief born of love, speaks hope into Lazarus's tomb, calling his friend forth as a sign of God's glory and of our hope.

This story of resurrection is about the power of God to Unbind and Release us from that which limits life, not just in scripture, but in our lives too! I invite you to consider what in our own lives needs to be unbound. What needs to be released.

Where has darkness enclosed our lives making us feel like we're living in a deep cave or cold tomb? Perhaps it's a physical struggle, a diagnosis of cancer, a surgery that's pending, a recovery that's taken longer than expected. An addiction that has taken over every aspect of your life. Perhaps fear wraps our lives so tightly we don't live life to the fullest, we don't trust, we choose to limit ourselves and God. Or we worry about change that is coming in our lives, in our family, in our church, in our community. Perhaps grief has led you to a dark time in your life, removed you from the joy and company of loved ones, or led you to doubt God's love and grace.

So much binds us in our life—physically, emotionally...spiritually. But Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life!" Do you believe this? The power of resurrection is available each and every day of our lives. Not just for Lazarus, not just on Easter morning, not just here in church... The gift to be unbound and released is a daily blessing of grace and hope.

And this is revealed so powerfully in today's story after Jesus commands, "Lazarus, Come out!" Now don't get me wrong, that's a HUGE moment... I mean that's the climax of the story—the resurrection moment—God's power revealed for all to see! But then comes another powerful command to the crowd gathered around the cave. Jesus said, "Unbind him, and let him go." Jesus charges the people around the cave with the task... unbind and release.

I believe that when Jesus gives the command to untie Lazarus and let him go free, Jesus is also speaking to each of us in the community of faith. Jesus brings life... he brings us TO life each and every day... but he needs US...the body of Christ in the world today. Jesus needs the community to unbind Lazarus... and so we too now share in the power of resurrection. Christ says to us—unbind the suffering and hurting world and let it go free! This is what it means to be the church—the Living Body of Christ—A Resurrection people. Friends, it is our call, our challenge, our work... to help unbind and release those who are in need, those suffering, constricted, doubting, hurting, fearful and hopeless.

And some may say, "Who am I to do such work? Who am I to release others from their fears? Who am I to unbind another's pain or grief?"

Mother Teresa of Calcutta was a believer of Christ who answered this call to unbind and release the poor and sick who lived in despair. She would answer such doubts by saying these words: "Give yourself fully to God, who will use you to accomplish great things... on the condition that you believe much more in His love... than in your own weakness." (from *Life in the Spirit*)

When we unbind the sick, the lonely, the hurting, the angry, the sorrowful... we help release the Lord of Life to do God's healing, restoring work. We help the Lord of Light provide direction and purpose to those who are lost. We help the Lord of Justice right wrongs and bring peace to troubled hearts. We help the Lord of Love to resurrect hope.

Unbind and Release - Jesus' command for our own hearts, troubles and lives individually... but also a command corporately—for the community of believers— who know and have seen the mighty power of God at work. Unbind all who suffer and let them go in the name and power of Jesus the Christ. This is our task. This is our calling. This is our gift to give to a hurting and needy world. The gift to be unbound and released is a daily blessing of grace and hope. May it be so.