

We Gather for Worship

Introduction

Call to Worship

Every Sunday when we gather together, we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. Because of his death and resurrection, we are set free from sin. In our baptism, we enter into Jesus' death and find new life in him. That is God's gift to us! Let us praise our gracious God!

Reading the Word John 11 - selected passages
This is the Word of God for the People of God.
Thanks be to God

Message "Raised to New Life"

Rev. Dr. Deb Hanson

Prayer (unison)

Holy God, Martha and Mary didn't understand why Jesus stayed away until after Lazarus was dead. They knew that if Jesus had come while Lazarus was sick, he could have healed him. Yet, Jesus knew that God would be glorified even more powerfully when Lazarus was raised from the dead. There are times when we don't understand why things happen the way they do, either. Help us to have faith that good will overcome evil and God's promise of new life in Christ will help us trust that we take the journey of faith with each other and with the presence of Christ at our side. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer (unison)

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Pastor's Blessing

I am the
Resurrection
and the *Life*

March 29, 2020



SERMON TRANSCRIPT GIVEN BY
REV. DR. DEB HANSON

"Called Out" – 3/29/2020
First UMC – Rev. Dr. Debra J. Hanson

SCRIPTURE: John 11:1-45

THEME: God calls us out of death into life.

"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" (Psalm 13:1-2)

"I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. My eyes waste away because of grief; they grow weak because of my foes." (Psalm 6:6-7).

"Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (Psalm 10:1).

We've been there, haven't we? We know that gut-wrenching feeling of despair and grief when someone we love dies. The Psalmist knew, too, and didn't hesitate to cry out to God. These three passages from the Psalms were some of the passages that I highlighted in my Bible during my journey of grief after my best friend died nearly 20 years ago. There were days when I felt so alone and lonely, and even though I never really felt that God was absent, I wondered how far away God really was. Like Martha and Mary, Lazarus' sisters, I was angry that it seemed as if God had not given a cure for her cancer. But she would give me insights into her journey toward death as we would talk about it. Her confidence in God's presence with her helped me to cope with her death.

Jesus faced death in today's story. He not only stood in front of Lazarus' tomb where the body of his dear friend had been laid, but he also was facing his own death that would come only days away. For months the temple leaders had been looking for him, trying to find a way to arrest him. He had stayed in hiding, but then came the message that Lazarus was sick. This Lazarus, who was one of his best friends, whom he loved, was sick to the point of dying. By the time the messenger actually left Bethany to take the message to Jesus, Lazarus had probably already died, so he would have been buried the same day since there were no embalming methods in those days. Yet, even after the messenger arrived and shared the news, Jesus waited where he was before going to Bethany. He tarried. That is a good word to describe Jesus' delay. "Tarried" is actually a verb that tells us he purposefully held back in before going to Bethany to be with Lazarus, Martha, and Mary.

Although the disciples totally didn't understand any of it, they didn't think they should even go since the authorities were out to get Jesus. However, Jesus knew what he intended to do, and he knew that the miracle that would occur would not only restore Lazarus to life, but also incite those who were seeking to put him to death. He knew that this trip to Bethany, which is about two miles outside Jerusalem, would be the beginning of the end of his earthly life. So he "tarried" in order to allow enough time between Lazarus' death and being raised so that everyone would know that Lazarus truly WAS dead. Many Jews believed that the person's spirit hovered over the grave for three days, and after that, there was no chance for revival.

In the meantime, Jesus' friends Martha and Mary were mourning their brother's death. They were experiencing the pain and suffering that we heard about in the passages from the Psalms that I read earlier. Not only had they lost their beloved brother, not only had they lost the male head of household, but their dear friend Jesus had ignored their message and had not hurried to be with them. Then, when Jesus did arrive, Martha went out to meet him and leveled the accusation, "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

We recognize those feelings, too, don't we? "God, where were you when my loved one died?" "God, why didn't you do something so this wouldn't happen?" "God, why? Why? Why?" "God, where were you?" "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," both Martha and Mary said. We want answers. We want assurances. We want it to be fixed. We want proof. Thomas Edison was a scientific genius and an exacting and practical man who didn't casually say anything he didn't believe. Mrs. Edison told about the night Edison was at death's door. Suddenly it was evident that he wanted to say something, so she and the doctor bent down close. This great scientist, with a smile on his face, said, "It is very beautiful over there!" (*Illustrations Unlimited*, p. 177, #21). For someone to hear that as their loved one is dying would be reassuring. Yet, it doesn't take away the grief and pain that linger. It wouldn't have explained anything to Martha and Mary at that point.

Mary didn't go out to meet Jesus; instead, she remained at the house weeping until Martha appeared and told her that Jesus was looking for her. When Mary arrived, she threw herself at his feet and wept. It is at that point when Jesus also wept. While we aren't clear about what was behind his weeping, many commentators believe that he wept for a variety of reasons: He wept for their grief and loss of hope. Maybe he wept because so many failed to believe. Perhaps he also wept for what he was about to face and the lack of understanding and hearing his message by the temple authorities. Regardless, he wept. Jesus is not unmoved by our circumstances, our grief, our loss. He understands, and he shared our human feelings completely and fully.

But Jesus knew that death wasn't the end. Martha's confession that Lazarus would be raised on the last day indicated that she believed it, too, but she wasn't thinking about their present circumstances when she professed her faith in the resurrection of the dead. When Mary arrived, no theological discussion happened, only weeping, and they went to the tomb at Jesus' request. After Jesus ordered the stone to be removed, Martha's practical side took over, "But there is already a stench because he has been in there four days!" Jesus reassured her, raised his eyes to heaven and prayed out loud for everyone to hear, and shouted, "Lazarus! Come out!" This was a command given with authority.

We can only imagine what it would have been like to be there, holding our breath, waiting to see how this drama unfolded. We can only imagine the fear that the appearance of Lazarus in grave clothes at the entrance of the tomb brought. We can only imagine the joy and amazement that Martha and Mary must have felt. We can only imagine what the disciples and the people standing there might have thought. We DO know that the temple authorities were even more threatened by Jesus, and this started the movement toward his arrest.

In our lives, we often die to something. Sometimes it is grief; sometimes it is the death of a relationship; sometimes it is moving to a new home in a new community; sometimes it is loss of trust in others or in God; sometimes it is betrayal by a friend – the list could go on and on. In those times, it would be easy to say, "God wasn't there. God ignored me. God doesn't care. God doesn't answer prayer." But I think we need to look at the sequence of events in this story about Lazarus.

1. *Jesus tarried.* There are times when we really struggle to hold onto our faith when it feels like God is hiding somewhere or ignoring us.

2. *Jesus wept.* God enters into our deepest pain and sorrow with us and understands because Jesus experienced the same things we experience.

3. *Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb.* There are times when we hear God's call in our lives to open doors, give us guidance and direction in life, calling us away from destructive places in our lives.

4.

1.. There are times when we need to feel unbound from something and set free to move on in our lives. Sometimes that happens with the help of others who are called by God to be our companions on the journey. Sometimes it is those who love us and care about us and who stand by us that helps God's love to sink in. Like God, they don't give up on us. Like God, they help us to unbind the wounds and bring healing. Like God, they stay with us even when we feel alone.

Lazarus represents humanity with all our weaknesses and faults. Lazarus teaches us that Jesus' love and God's power are greater than we can understand or imagine. Lazarus helps us to understand that we can cry to God, rant and rail against God, yell at God, and God is okay with that. Lazarus reminds us that we are mortal and fully dependent on God as our creator. What could Lazarus have felt and experienced?

Playwright Eugene O'Neill once wrote a play entitled LAZARUS LAUGHED. The play deals with the Biblical story of Lazarus but the plot focuses on what happened to him in the years after Jesus called him back to life after four days in the tomb. In the play Lazarus comes out of his grave laughing...not a scornful, bitter kind of laughter, but a soft, tender, all-embracing sort of sound that seems to well up from a joy that is utterly bottomless. There is a radiance emanating from him that makes him look younger than when he died. There is a peace and serenity about his being that is absolutely tangible. As soon as Lazarus gets home and emotions have calmed down a bit, his sisters ask him the inevitable question: What is it like beyond the grave? Lazarus says, "There is only life. There is only laughter...the laughter of God soaring into the heights and the depths. There is no death really. Death is not the end, it's not an abyss or the entrance into nothingness or chaos or punishment. Death is a portal, a passageway into deeper and brighter life. Eternal change, everlasting growth...that is what lies ahead. There is only life, sisters, nothing but life. The grave is not what you think it is. It is literally empty...a doorway, not destruction." As the play unfolds Lazarus goes on to live a life in which he is freed from the fear of death. (Lindy Black, *Sermon Nuggets*, found at Text This Week.com)

How are we being called out of our tombs today? What do we need to die to in order to live life more fully? Maybe we need to die to anger, bitterness, pride, regrets, old scars, shame, greed, or prejudice that keep us bound. (*The list comes from Gwen Purushotham in 2011 Disciplines, p. 111*) How are we being called to rid ourselves of the things that bind us to this world and keep us from growing in our relationship with God and others? How can we walk with others as companions on their journeys? What is God's calling us to be – to become? Maybe it's to be the best mother, father, grandparent, aunt, uncle, cousin, spouse, co-worker, church member, baseball coach, adult leader, or whatever it is God calls us to be. Maybe it's to live our lives differently, to call people to accountability in loving ways, to work with others to resolve issues, or to be peacemakers. Maybe it's to speak with honesty in spite of being ridiculed or ostracized. Or maybe it's to pray for others, be part of a support network, send cards, write letters, stay in touch with others.

Whatever it is, we can trust the presence of Christ with us, even when we may not be able to feel it. Jesus calls us out of whatever binds us and into renewal and healing. Jesus calls us to help unbind others as companions on the journey. Where – how – are you being called?

(NOTE: Many of the ideas in this sermon were inspired by David Lose, found at Text This Week in the commentary section for this week's Gospel lesson.)