

If You Had Been Here

Sermon 12 | Greystone Baptist Church | April 7, 2019
Fifth Sunday Lent
John 11

I was a young child when I first learned that Jesus could raise the dead. It was in that Bible Drill classroom where I first learned most of the stories I wrestled with in seminary and I wrestle with most of them even to this day. I remember stumbling upon this one distinctly because I found it when my peers and I were looking for the shortest verse in the Bible, “Jesus wept.” (John 11:35). Now I appreciate the irony of the shortest verse being contained within what feels like the longest story in the whole Bible!

Forty-five verses to tell the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead! If you had been there in that Bible Drill room, you might have chuckled along with us as we made ghost noises “oooooh, ooooooh” and acted out the dead man walking in a zombie like fashion – long before zombie’s were as cool as they are now. Back then the idea that Jesus would facilitate the dead man walking was creepy and urged disbelief. I’d heard about resurrection before but my childish imagination could only handle it when it was a spiritual reality that happened in heaven, someday, after we died. When I read verses like today’s, “I am the resurrection *and* the life...” I unintentionally lumped them together and forgot about the *and*, as if resurrection and life were the same theological concept.

But here, in John’s Gospel, something *else* is happening. What Jesus offers is more than resurrection (which will come later in John’s Gospel), Here, Jesus is offering *life*. Lazarus has been dead 4 days when Jesus arrives in Judea. We know he’s not just sleeping because John tells us the tomb is filled with the stench of decay. The sisters, Mary and Martha, are grieving the loss of their brother, and they were probably also angry with Jesus who arrives too late (as far as they are concerned). They’d sent word when Lazarus was still alive, asking Jesus to come and heal him. But he didn’t come until it was too late. Their grief is expressed by the statement each sister makes at some point in the narrative, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” “Your brother will rise again,” Jesus assures the sisters...but his response falls short. “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day,” Martha says. But Jesus responds, “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.”

Mary and Martha are unquestionably faithful to Jesus and his ministry. They know that Lazarus will live on in eternity but this immediate offering of life where the stench of death is still present is new and unfathomable.¹ Through their grief I wonder if the sisters questioned whether Jesus could actually bring their brother back of if this was some kind of cruel joke? Why would Jesus offer this kind of hope to such a hopeless situation? We, too, know know the natural rhythms of birth, life, death, and resurrection. We, too,

¹ Veronice Miles. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2, “Pastoral Perspective.”* p. 144.

expect that that which is dead will remain in the tomb. But here, Jesus speaks of a new kind of resurrection, one with urgency, one that will not and cannot wait.

Here, Jesus offers a new kind of hope, that which he calls life. This life that Jesus brings in John chapter 11 is not only restorative for Lazarus, but also for the sisters whose whole future was in question. Without their brother (and with no mention of a father or husbands) who would have provided for them? The death of Lazarus had ripples of pain and loss far broader than the immediate and acute pain of physical death. If Jesus could deliver on this hope that he offered – this life in the face of death – it would change everything.

On Wednesday night, several of us watched a documentary about an equally hopeless situation. Plagued by the illnesses of classism and racism, two Durham locals stood at an impasse representing two sides of an impossible situation: the integration of the Durham Public Schools. Despite the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court Ruling and the 1960's Federal Civil Rights Legislation, integration of the schools was not going well. In the Durham schools students were getting into fights over racial tensions and nobody had any idea what to do about it. Activists from all sides of the issue would come to town hall meetings and yell at each other and at local political leaders, offering no room for compromise on any side.

D.P. Ellis and Ann Atwater were two activists who knew one another from those screaming matches at city council. Ellis, who was the leader of the Durham Ku Klux Klan, was a frequent presence at town meetings where he would oppose civil rights activists and their advances, arguing that black people were taking over the city, stealing all the good jobs, and that apathetic whites were just sitting around and letting it happen. Atwater, who was privy to Ellis's racist outpourings, confessed that on one occasion she felt so much hatred for Ellis and his rants that she was tempted to jump up and cut him with a knife right there at city council.

Racism flowed through those town meetings and left nothing but the stench of decay in its wake. Black and white folks alike were victims of this deadly illness. There was no hope for an integrated future together. No hope for new life amongst those bones, no hope that "justice would flow down like a mighty stream" as the prophet Amos foretold... no hope at all, only illness and isolation, and death of relationship. I wouldn't be surprised if some of you remember this historical moment or these two public figures, after all Durham is just a few miles away (and the 1970's were not that long ago).

After watching the documentary on Wednesday, I heard a church member, reflect upon living in Durham during those years. He spoke about the fear that everyone felt. Fear that kept people inside at night, fear of fights, fear of violence breaking out, fear of neighbor so deeply ingrained within individuals and the social fabric that the situation seemed as hopeless as a tomb with the stone rolled closed. But one day Councilman Bill Riddick came up with a plan and he invited Ann Atwater, the black woman, civil rights activist, and C. P. Ellis, the Klansman to co-chair a charette (or a ten-day series of conversations in

which all voices were expressed, all opinions presented, all problems pointed out, and all people invited to participate in finding a solution). At first, there seemed to be no common ground. Ellis and Atwater didn't even want to work with one another. But one day Ellis overheard Atwater dissuade some children from tearing up the Klan uniform and publicity that he had posted in the hallway. Rather than damaging Ellis's property, Atwater told the children to read the documents so that they could understand why Ellis felt the way he did. (This sounds a lot like what Brené Brown would call: getting close.) In this moment, Ellis began to realize that Atwater wasn't as awful as he thought she was. From that point on, the two began to hear one another. They discovered all that they had in common: that they each had alcoholic parents, economic troubles, and ultimately that they were both concerned about their children's future. Little by little they got close, they took relational steps toward one another, loosening the ties that bound them to the graves of racism and prejudice and had them wrapped in burial clothes and entombed for so many years.

Just like Lazarus laid in his tomb, secured by the stone that covered the path in or out, Ellis and Atwater were dug in on their sides of this socio-political debate, with the great boulder of racism blocking the path to life.

When Jesus arrived in Judea, Mary and Martha were filled with grief (and probably a little anger). We can imagine ourselves in their situation, wanting to ask questions like, "Why didn't you come sooner?" "Don't you care about our brother, Lazarus?" "I thought you loved him." "Why did you let this happen?" Mary and Martha may have felt like Jesus waited too long, and now Lazarus' life was unable to be saved. It was a lost cause.

There certainly are moments when I lose hope in people and systems at work in our world. It's easy to look around and find divisions that seem irreparable. Whether I'm watching TV or listening to NPR, whether I'm reading bumper stickers in traffic or paying attention to who lives where... our whole world is (as Brené Brown describes it) divided up into camps of sameness and similarity, and each of us are just as guilty as everyone else when it comes to demonizing the common enemy, and assuming that those on the other side are a lost cause, trapped in their tombs of greed and gluttony and self-preservation. We may not have lived in Durham with CP Ellis and Ann Atwater, and we may not have been in Judea with Mary and Martha, but we have our own issues to contend with which makes me believe that if we had been there, in the first century or in the 1970s we might have lost hope too. We might have seen that which was dead and struggled to believe that new life was even possible in the present tense.

But Jesus said then and I believe Jesus says to us today: "Roll the stone away!" Move that boulder which is keeping Lazarus locked in the tomb...and clear the path for new life to emerge.

"Lazarus, come out!" Jesus says. And out he comes, walking on his own two feet away from the tomb and into the presence of the living. When he comes out of the grave, he still bears the wrappings of the dead and Jesus calls Mary and Martha to unbind him, to set

him free from the grave clothes that keep him tied to the past. “Unbind him and let him go,” Jesus says.

Even though Jesus has already brought him out from the grave, the women still have to get close enough to touch him, in order for Lazarus to truly be free. They have to get up close to the one they once thought dead and release him from bondage so that he might once again have life.

There were so many things that kept C.P. Ellis and Ann Atwater bound to their living tombs – racism and segregation being the most obvious. And once the federal government mandated that the boulder of segregation be rolled away, the trappings of death still needed to be cut from their bodies so that they could become loosed and freed to experience new life. But in order to be unbound, they needed to get close. So, the two worked closely together to figure out the school integration problem. They got to know one another and overtime, they began to recognize the divine spark of humanity that was alive within the other, buried deep in the tombs of fear and shame, hatred and racial prejudice. The miracle of *new life* happened in that charrette, where two entombed souls got close to one another and discovered that they were each God’s beloved children made in God’s image, and breathed into life by God’s own breath. When Jesus offers resurrection and life in Judea he is not only bringing it to Lazarus, he is also bringing it to Mary and Martha. Liberating them from their grief and restoring them to their brother. Their lives were resurrected too.

We may not have been there with Mary and Martha. And we may not have been there with Ellis and Atwater, but we have our own versions of tombs, boulders, and grave clothes which bind us and keep us from the life that Jesus is offering even now. Our tombs may look like grief of a loved one lost, they may look like financial insecurity or professional instability, they may look like shame from our past or an inability to see ourselves as enough. But as hearers of the Gospel and followers of Jesus it may be time for us to say “roll back that stone.”

Or maybe it’s time for us to draw closer to those who are bound up and marginalized in our world, either by poor choices in their past or by forces beyond their control – Jesus shows us here, in the story of Lazarus, that we don’t have to wait for resurrection in the eternal sense, there are people here and now, in our midst who are entombed and wrapped in grave clothes waiting and in need for someone to draw near and unbind the cloths of poverty, immobility, and despair.

Perhaps there is *new life available* for each of us and all of us if only we might get close enough to unbind one another from that which keeps us tied to our graves.

Since we are here, together, wandering in our wilderness, maybe instead of digging in our heels and trying to fit in with people who are just like us...maybe we could draw nearer to

those with whom we differ... and begin loosening one another from all that is binding them.

Since we are here, together, maybe we can open our hearts enough to say “roll back that stone, come on out Lazarus” and begin clearing the path for new life to emerge for all of us not only in heaven, but also here and now.

Here in the home stretch of our Lenten journeys, we may be tempted to give up hope because resurrection seems too far off. As we leave this place, let us not lose hope but may we cling to the promise that Jesus *is* the resurrection *and* the life...for all eternity and here and now. So as we leave this place to live our lives, let us go in love – ready to unbind all that is bound with grave clothes and the lingering stench of decay. Let us go in peace – offering ourselves wholly to one another with graciousness and understanding. Let us go with courage – leaning in and getting close to all that may seem like a lost cause.

Trusting in the grace of God
Who is the resurrection AND the life.
Amen.