

“Being Liberated From All That Binds Us”

Psalm 130; John 11:17-45

Fifth Sunday in Lent: April 10, 2011

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Today’s gospel lesson turns this Fifth Sunday in Lent into a kind of dress rehearsal for Easter Sunday, which is still two weeks away. The lectionary Gospel reading of the raising of Lazarus is intentionally placed on this Sunday so that we might anticipate what lies ahead and be given strength and hope for the next part of the journey. It is about a miracle of liberation from death – the raising of Lazarus from the dead to new life. The Gospel writer would have us comprehend another kind of life – a life liberated from all that binds us. It is a liberated life – a resurrected life of those baptized in Jesus Christ – that you and I are being asked to live now. “All those who believe in me,” Jesus said, “though they die, will come to life; and all who are alive and believe in me will never die.”

“Come and see,” someone says to Jesus, “come and see the body of the one you loved, your dear friend Lazarus, and maybe then it will be real for you and you can accept what has happened and go on.” The grief of losing a beloved friend was very real for Jesus who stopped, and wept, and held on to his friends. And then Jesus took matters into his own hands and went forward to the tomb. “Lazarus, come out,” Jesus cried in a loud voice. And Lazarus came out of the tomb, trailing his long scarf of bandages behind him. “Unbind him, Jesus said, “and let him go.”

“Unbind him. Let him go!” So speaks Jesus the Christ as we encounter him in today’s gospel lesson. And this is a word not only to Lazarus, but also to each one of us. There are three things that Jesus says to us as individuals and as the gathered people of God in this place today:

1. Come out!
2. Unbind!
3. Release!

Before we look more closely at each of these three commands – “Come out!” “Unbind!” and “Release!” – there is a prior step, a prerequisite, a prelude to our own liberation. It is simply this: “Listen!” Let me say it again, “Listen!” As I have entered my mellower, slightly more mature years, I am convinced that nothing of any significance happens in our lives without listening. Certainly this is true and evident in our human relationships. How much

more is it not necessary to listen for the voice of God – to be still long enough to hear God’s voice? Here’s the method: First, we stop to listen, then – and only then – will we hear the word of the Lord. Want to hear Jesus? Be still, and listen. Listen – that’s the priority.

After listening, the silence is broken by the shout of Jesus: “Lazarus, come out!” and the subsequent commands, “Unbind him, and release him!” That same voice of Jesus thunders and echoes in the cavernous tombs of our own circumstances – tombs that we will talk more about in a moment – and we have the same opportunity as Lazarus to respond, to be freed, and to be raised to a new quality of life that Jesus offers all people. The voice of Jesus is not a quiet, comforting voice today. It is a commanding, shouting voice. If you are not hearing it, there’s only one reason: You’re not paying attention!

Listen and the liberating commands of Jesus will be heard. And what will we do? I have suggested three actions we may take. I will give them to you in the same sequence that they are followed in the eleventh chapter of John’s gospel when Lazarus is freed from a tomb and miraculously emerges to live triumphantly over death.

The first action is this: **“Come out!”** “Come out of what?” you ask. “Your tomb,” I answer. When the gospel writer shows Jesus commanding Lazarus out of a tomb, we are commanded metaphorically to come out of our tombs. I want you to think of a “tomb” today as anything that symbolizes the death of part of you because it holds you captive. Let me describe some entombed places we may find ourselves in:

- Perhaps some economic, financial, and material obsessions or compulsions.
- That perfectionism and those expectations you put on yourself, or society puts on you that you cannot and will not attain.
- That dark, despairing place of depression.
- Those fears, regrets, uncertainties, and griefs that have a deadly hold on you.
- Those choices you have made that you may regret.
- That unreal vision of your world and a future that is pure fantasy – something that will never happen.
- Perhaps a dreary, dull job that you drag yourself to Monday through Friday.
- Perhaps a dark place of indescribable loss of and unrelenting grief for a loved one.

These are just some of the tombs that we are called out of today. The challenge is to step out of our tomb . . . step through our barrier. There is this choice before us: a choice between life and death. We are urged to choose life . . .to get out of our tomb. That's the first action.

The second action is this: “**Unbind him! Unbind her!**” “Unbind him or her from what?” you ask me. “Unbind those who are bound from anything and everything that binds the spirit of life and love in them,” I answer. Notice how Lazarus comes forth from the tomb when Jesus calls him, but he still has bandages all around his body. Jesus turns to those with him and says, “Unbind him.”

When we take the first action and come out of our tomb, whatever that tomb may be, we are still bound. Total freedom is not possible until we admit that we are bound and permit others to unbind us. What is important . . . what is essential here . . . is to desire Jesus' offer of liberation from all that binds us. Notice that others are asked by Jesus to unbind Lazarus. Getting unbound is something that happens in the context of Christian community where there is, hopefully, unconditional love, acceptance, support, compassion, and a deep empathy with and for others. This happens when we begin to admit that there is something that binds us and permit others to draw near to us, or permit ourselves to be drawn to others whom Jesus may use to help unbind us.

When an experience such as depression overwhelms us, as it did me a few weeks ago, and we find ourselves entombed in a dark place where in the words of the psalmist we pray, “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications,” if we listen carefully, we will hear the Lord's commanding voice: “Ivan, come forth . . .come out of that dark cavernous place of despair and defeat. Let others help unbind you.” Thank God for those who support us at such times! Thank God for the cards, letters, e-mails, and nice surprises and offers we receive to remind us that we are loved unconditionally even when we struggle with feelings of self-deprecation, inadequacy, and insecurity! [*Share two cards here.*] Thank God for wise and trustworthy professionals who through therapy and the application of medication are there to offer expertise that helps to unbind us! Thank God for all who have heard the Lord's command to a ministry, a calling, a career that unbinds us! Would that I had submitted to the unbinding role of professionals years ago! That is my only regret. But now that I have recognized this as an essential part of my

health and well-being in the future, I believe I will emerge a stronger, more self-aware, more self-confident, unbound and more alive child of God.

Come out! Unbind him! And, thirdly, “**Release him!**” After telling those nearby to unbind Lazarus, Jesus says, “Release him ...liberate him ...let him go.” There are no restrictions, no limitations, no boundaries when we have burst out of our tombs, been raised to new life in Jesus Christ, and been freed from every kind of bondage such as hatred, jealousy, envy, suspicion, prejudice, or bigotry. Those who recognize that they are made alive in Christ are called to live in community with others where all boundaries that separate people one from the other are removed: boundaries of ethnicity, gender, age, political persuasion, socio-economic status, educational levels, and all other walls are down. In Christ we are set free from all these borders and boxes, these lids and labels, which have for too long separated us.

Now that we are unbound and released, it’s time to get going. “To get going where?” you ask. “Jesus sends us to our neighbors – far and near – to any who need this liberating news that Jesus frees, unbinds, and lets us loose on the world,” I say. Having heeded Jesus’ commands to come out of our tombs, to be unbound and released by God’s people around us, let’s get going! “We’ve a story to tell to the nations.” We’re called to be Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Others need to hear our story – the old, old story of Jesus and his love. We need to get going and get others to join the Jesus’ “Liberation Movement.” We need to help free others from their tombs by introducing them to Jesus the Christ who raises you and me, and will raise them, too, from death to life.

Come out! Unbind him! Release him! These glorious commands of Jesus thunder through the gospel of John this morning. Very specifically, Jesus says to us here and now: “Lazarus, Ivan, Peggy, John, Jane, Tim, Tracy, Don, Debbie – whoever you are – come out of your tomb!” And you, who surround those of us who have been bound, hear Jesus’ compelling commands: “Unbind them and release them!”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.