

Sunday, March 26, 2023
Fifth Sunday in Lent (Year A)
Ezekiel 37.1-14; John 11.1-45

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/163965399873003>

(Sermon begins at about 17:20)

“Unbind Him”

Every Sunday this Lenten season, we have been introduced to a guide on our Lenten journey. We started with Jesus being tempted and tested in the wilderness—the ultimate Lenten guide. We then encountered some pretty unlikely guides, at least at first glance: Nicodemus, Photini (also known as the Samaritan woman at the well), and the man born blind. Today we have yet another unlikely guide in the form of a dead man: Lazarus. Although, that may be a bit of a stretch. I mean, he is dead, after all. Well, until the end of the story when Jesus raises him from the dead and he emerges from the tomb bound in strips of cloth. In reality, the real guide here is Jesus himself. Although Lazarus is critical to, and is certainly the prompt, the catalyst, for the central teaching in today’s Gospel story, as well as for what follows.

To fully appreciate what is going on here, it helps to understand that John’s Gospel is organized around seven miracles. Or what John refers to as “signs”—signs that reveal Jesus’ identity and mission. As one commentator notes, these signs are “supposed to catch our attention (even catch our breath!), drawing us toward life with and in God. Like road signs, these events refer beyond themselves to bigger, deeper realities”¹ about who Jesus is. The first is the changing of water into wine at the wedding at Cana, which, in John’s Gospel, inaugurates Jesus’ public ministry. The raising of Lazarus, which we hear today, is the seventh sign. Coming near the end of Jesus’ public ministry, near the end of his life, not long before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on what we refer to as Palm Sunday.

The Gospel account of this seventh sign starts off a bit awkward. When Jesus gets word that his dear friend Lazarus is ill and near death, Jesus does not immediately rush off to be with him, as one might expect. Instead, he delays several days. An action that is puzzling to the disciples. One that is puzzling to most of us. Although, there was a reason for the delay. One that becomes apparent as the story goes on. One that, in hindsight, would have been clear to the disciples. In those days, it was believed that the soul lingered around the body for three days after death. After that amount of time, by the fourth day, the soul was thought to have left the corpse for good. As we are told, by the time Jesus does arrive in Bethany, Lazarus has been dead four days. Meaning, according to ancient understanding, he was most definitely and irreversibly dead. But why would Jesus want to wait until Lazarus was actually dead?

Particularly when he could have rushed to his side and likely healed him before it was too late. The answer to this—or at least part of the answer—is in what, in the moment, seems an odd statement by Jesus. When he informs the disciples that Lazarus was indeed dead, he then says, “For your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe.” But believe what?

Jesus and the disciples then go to Bethany to be with Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters. The next critical piece in the puzzle surrounding this seventh sign is in Jesus' interaction with Martha. In a somewhat awkward moment, Martha says to Jesus, half accusingly and half expectantly, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Which leads to some discussion about understandings of resurrection, with Martha and Jesus not being on the same page. Martha holding to traditional Jewish understanding of the general resurrection at the end of the ages, and Jesus talking about something more immediate and more profound: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who believes in me will never die." A statement which, if true, completely changes the understanding of what resurrection means. And of who Jesus is.

After a brief interaction with Mary along the same lines, Jesus seems to decide that actions speak louder than words. He asks to see where Lazarus has been buried. Not only does he want to see the tomb where Lazarus is buried, Jesus wants to see Lazarus in the tomb: "Take away the stone." After protests about the stench of a body four days dead, Jesus responds with "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" A sure sign that something big is about to happen. Bringing together all the pieces of the puzzle: Jesus' statement to the disciples that he was glad he was not with Lazarus when he died so that they may believe; and Jesus' statement to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life." Brought together and fulfilled in a simple command: "Lazarus, come out!"

It is now obvious that Jesus delayed in going to Lazarus to prove a point. That he is indeed the resurrection and the life. That he is the source of resurrection and new life. Something that would only be believed if all those witnessing the miraculous event were certain, absolutely certain, that Lazarus was indeed dead. If this had happened a day or two before, the raising of Lazarus would have merely been chalked up to the probability that he was not really dead to begin with, and therefore not really raised from the dead by Jesus. That it was all just a coincidence; that Lazarus just happened to "wake up" at the same time Jesus happened to be there. But the four days in the tomb proves otherwise. As they say, timing is everything.

It is obvious that Jesus timed this to make a critical point. Now, Jesus was not generally so concerned about "proving" anything. If people wanted to believe, great; if not, oh well. But this was different. This was a critical point that he needed to make right away. After all, his time was near. He had to make a point in light of the fact that in a matter of days he would face the ultimate test of his assertion that he is the resurrection and the life. That he would provide the ultimate proof of being the resurrection and the life. For this act of raising Lazarus from the dead was not just a demonstration of his healing powers. It was not just an action of saving a dear friend. It was a foreshadowing of what awaited him in Jerusalem. Although, admittedly, a pale foreshadowing at that. What will happen in Jerusalem will make the raising of Lazarus seem like child's play. This seventh sign pointing to something critical about Jesus. And in and of itself pointing to something far more significant, not only for Jesus, but for all humanity.

Ironically, it was the raising of Lazarus that spelled the beginning of the end for Jesus. Immediately after the miraculous event in Bethany, the religious authorities decide that was the last straw. They already viewed Jesus as a threat to their authority. Performing such a

remarkable feat as raising someone from the dead confirmed it. They feared that because of such miracles, the people would believe in him and turn their backs on them. After all, the ancient prophecies, such as those we heard in our Old Testament reading from Ezekiel, foretold that God would come and liberate and reenergize Israel. The sign that this was about to happen is spoken by the Lord himself: “You shall know that I am the Lord when I open your graves” (Ez 37.13). The raising of Lazarus certainly qualifies as the opening of a grave. The people would likely recognize this as a fulfillment of prophecy, as pointing to Jesus as the embodiment of God himself. They would turn from listening to the temple authorities to following Jesus. Which in turn could lead to insurrection against the temple authorities. The authorities feared the Roman occupiers stepping in and cracking down on them, and possibly even destroying the temple. Based on these fears, their course of action was clear. Jesus had to go. Although the joke was on them. For in plotting to get Jesus out of the way to avoid the ancient prophecy, they only hastened its fulfillment. In their plot to kill Jesus, the Jewish authorities were merely laying the groundwork for an eighth and ultimate sign—the resurrection of Jesus himself. The ultimate fulfillment of ancient prophecy and the realization of the Jewish authorities’ fears.

I started by implying that Lazarus is a guide for us in our Lenten journey. That is not entirely true. Lazarus is not so much a guide for us on our Lenten journey, but rather a guide as we move beyond our Lenten journey and continue on with whatever follows our Lenten experience. After Jesus cries out, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

“Unbind him.” This is a beautiful image for what awaits us at the end of our journey through Lent and Holy Week. I could say more, but you know what? I don’t want to get too far ahead of where Jesus is leading us. I don’t want to get too close to Easter. Not just yet. So, let’s just stop here, and just hold on to that powerful image: unbind him. Let that image be with you as we anticipate the next leg of our journey. Reflect on that image—unbind him, unbind her—and what it might mean for you as we move ever closer to Jerusalem and to another tomb.

¹ “Glory: SA:T’s Lectionary Commentary for Lent 5,” SALT, March 21, 2023.

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/3/24/glory-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-5>.