

“Look for the Liberator”



Pastor Brad

John 11:1-45

As we continue our series "Looking for Love in all the wrong places," Sometimes the things we think offer love actually seek to bind us, preventing us from being full and whole and offering our best love to the world. The story of Lazarus, whose funeral shrouds trail him out of the tomb, offer us a metaphor of new life as we recognize that true love is that which unbinds us, that wants for us more, not less, freedom and life.

Jesus says to us, "Come out!" Walk! Live! Love! Shed your funeral clothes and offer your deepest self, your deepest love, for the world. Of course this kind of love can be dangerous, as we will see as the events of Holy Week loom closer. But the price of continuing to look for love in the wrong places is higher than the blessing of life lived boldly. "Come out!" Walk! Live! Love!

During the First World War, there were two friends who serving side by side together on the front lines. Naturally, one of them was wounded and left helpless and in pain in no man's land. The other one, at great peril to his own life, crawled out of the foxhole to help his dying friend. When the man finally reached him, his friend looked up at him and said simply: "I knew you would come."

When the sisters sent their message to Jesus about how sick Lazarus' was, they never once asked Him to come. Why not? With their brother so sick, wouldn't their message include something like "Your friend is sick – come at once!" How many of us have gotten that phone call? "You need to be here." The sisters knew and loved Jesus like family. They knew he would come. One of the most precious things in the world is to have a house and a home that you can go to any time and find rest and understanding, peace and love.

I find this when I travel. As you probably know, not counting Carbondale I have 3 other churches in which I have served in the past and relationships were formed with youth and adults alike. Even in Lakewood I have people who open their homes to me so I can study or sleep or – both! It's one of the best examples of Christian behavior I can think of. Hospitality - Real hospitality.

And this is what Jesus found in the home of Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus. Jesus, who had no home of his own, no place to lay his head, found just such a place in this house in Bethany, where three people loved him like family, and he could find some much needed rest from the stresses of life. They knew he would come. They did not know that he would wait until Lazarus was already dead to show up!.

That's one of the big questions for this story: "Why wait?" After getting Mary and Martha's message, why would Jesus wait two more days before going to visit? Different commentators

have proposed a different reasons why Jesus wouldn't just go right away. One suggestion is that Jesus wanted to be sure he was unquestionably dead.

Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses. He doesn't seem to be breathing and his eyes are glazed. The other guy whips out his phone and calls the emergency services. He gasps, "My friend is dead! What can I do?" The operator says "Calm down. I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead." There is a silence; then a gunshot is heard. Back on the phone, the guy says "OK, now what?"^[3]

That just doesn't sound like Jesus to me. This delay, it is suggested, would make the miracle he proposed even that much more miraculous. The wonder of seeing a man raised would be even greater if he had been dead 4 days! But I don't see Jesus grandstanding like that just to prove a point.

The real reason Jesus waited to go to Bethany, according to one of my favorite commentators William Barclay, is that the Gospel writer John always presents Jesus as someone who acts entirely on his own initiative – not because anyone else is persuading him to do it. When he turned the water into wine at Cana He almost bristles when Mary tells him they're out of wine. His response to his mother is, "... what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." Then he acts, according to John, totally out of his own initiative. It's John's aim to show Jesus doing the things he did, not because he was pressed into it, but because Jesus chose to do them in his own sweet time.

Great lesson there – maybe you've noticed -- God's timing is way different from ours. John is teaching us that when we want Jesus to do something, we have to remember to let Him do it his way, in His time.

This brings us to the next question, which came up with everyone who was at Bible study this past week. Why would Jesus cry when he arrived in Bethany if he already knew that Lazarus was dead?

Washington Irving said, "There is sacredness in tears. They are not a mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are the messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition and of unspeakable love." In Psalm 56:8 the psalmist, possibly King David, cries, "Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?" (Psalm 56:8).

"Put Thou my tears into Thy bottle." Ancient "tear bottles" or 'unguentariums' have been excavated by archaeologists in Egypt and Israel. These little vessels were used to catch and preserve the owner's tears during times of grief or extreme pressure. This is a remarkable insight into the tender heart of our heavenly Protector. God has a tear bottle — maybe even one for each of us.

My father is a retired engineer – a true pragmatist. Everything in its place and a place for everything. In all the years that I know him, I have never once seen him cry. Other than the occasional outburst of anger or frustration with the kids, he was a model of mid-western stoicism.

So we boys learned to have the same emotional control that Dad did. I have to admit though, since I got sober I do get more emotional than before. I find myself crying during those tear-jerker movies like E. T. or certain commercials around Christmas, but I don't cry at the important things. I'm not saying that this is good or bad; it's just the way we are in my family. We don't cry.

Even when Mom died last year ... I thought I almost caught dad getting a little choked up once, but I gotta tell you – only my sister actually cried; Two brothers, myself, dad – nothing. And by the way, it's one of the biggest disservices we commit in the raising of our boys: "Don't cry - Be man."

I have often heard death referred to as "The Great Equalizer." All of us --rich and poor, good and bad, Christian and non-Christian -- have an appointment with death. The thing that makes death so difficult is that it's also "The Great Separator." Death separates us from people we love. When someone we love dies, we lose the joy of their presence—seeing their face, hearing their voice. I'm always finding things and I think, "Mom would love that, I should send it--" And even if they were "good" Christians, there's always that inkling of doubt: will I really see them again?

This brings us back to the Gospel reading, which contains the shortest verse in the Bible, verse 35: "Jesus wept." Jesus knew that his separation from Lazarus would be very short-lived. I figure Jesus knew before Lazarus got sick that He would raise him from the dead. So why would Jesus weep?

Some commentators have suggested that Jesus wept out of compassion for Mary and Martha. There's no question that this is part of it. He loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus deeply, and it was hard for him to see them experience the loss of their beloved brother at such a young age. That's one of the things that gets me – I'll cry at a funeral for someone I don't know before I cry at my own mother's funeral. I don't get it – I cry when other people are sad. But I think that there's much more behind Jesus' tears than compassion and empathy.

I think the clue to Jesus' tears lies in a verb John uses in verses 33 and 38. This verb is the Greek *embrimaomai*, which is usually translated in our Bibles as, "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." Which gives the impression that Jesus was moved by grief. But this Greek word speaks more of anger than grief. In classic Greek literature it's used for that snorting that horses make; in Mark 1:43 and Matthew 9:30, it is translated as a "strong warning," and in Mark 14:5, it is

translated "scold" or "rebuke." In all of its uses, the word conveys the idea of indignation. So more than being moved by grief or compassion, Jesus was angry and indignant. What if Jesus is weeping at the behavior of those around him?

Jesus cries one other time in Luke 19:41. When looking down on Jerusalem from a distance, Jesus weeps knowing what would happen to the citizens of the city because of their rejection of him. Jesus weeps with the people for their grief and loss, but He is also deeply moved by their lack of faith. After all, he's been teaching for about 3 years by this time, and still they don't get it.

Who then is the liberator? Where shall we find this liberator?

Here's Lazarus – a single guy living at home with his sisters. When we meet Lazarus, something deadly has taken hold of him and it will not let him go.

Some of us understand Lazarus – we have been held in a grip like that -- buried in helplessness and hopelessness, fear and silence smothering the life out of us, with the smell of death in our noses. We know what it's like to feel spiritually and emotionally dead – no longer feeling the light of life. The death of Lazarus is real and powerful – it even reduces Jesus to tears. It's the end for him; the tomb is sealed, death has had its way – the only thing left to do is pass around the Kleenex. But Jesus has a different idea.

Now, I have friends who laugh about this next part as being the great gay liberation text – John 11:43b – "[Jesus] cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'

I wanted originally to focus today's message on the LGBT community and their current struggles within the UMC, 'cuz it's a big deal and it's going to get bigger before it's over. But I think this applies to everyone -- Come on out, Lazarus. Come out of the grave, come out of the tomb. Leave behind the trappings and wrappings of death! Come out into the light! You're not dead any longer.

And then – most important message in this whole passage, comes after Jesus restores life to Lazarus. His work here is done! The most important thing comes when Jesus says to the community, "Unbind him and set him free." You do it, he says! That's good news; Lazarus isn't alone. We don't have to do this alone! There are people gathered around who are gonna help him tear off his grave clothes and step into the breeze -- and the stink of death dissipates in the fresh air. It's the people – the community ultimately that unbinds Lazarus and sets him free.

You see, it's our job! Jesus – God – gives us life but who does the unbinding – the freeing? We do! And that is what I see us doing in our churches, especially the local 'community' church – we are setting people free, in whatever small ways – or big ways that we can. We have to risk

vulnerability in order to create an intentional community in the midst of the wilderness – our chosen, non-biological family that we've talked about before. We are breaking the silence, saying the words, naming the fears and injustice. We are all coming out – straight people need to come out, too, come out of the darkness of the dogma and the mistakes the church has made over the years. Give voice to your hopes and dreams and share your vision of a better day, in a better more welcoming and affirming church. And most importantly, we are working to build a safe church where everyone –black, white, gay, straight, physically & emotionally challenged -- everybody can be fully present.

It's the community that unbinds Lazarus. It's the community that must ensure that when the Church loudly boasts about their "Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open doors," that we really mean it.

Who is the liberator? The easy answer? Jesus! Because the answer to every question ever asked church is always 'Jesus.' The real answer is "You - you are the liberator." We are responsible for unbinding and freeing our beloved church as well as our friends and neighbors from the bondage of bigotry in all its forms. And that, in turn, unbinds the Lazarus in all of us to live and to share the abundant life that God so desires for us.