

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 130
Romans 8:6-11
JOHN 11:1-45

Fifth Sunday in Lent

“Lazarus, come out!” ... “Unbind him, and let him go.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

While Jesus is approaching Lazarus’ tomb, he is conversing with Martha who says that if he had made it sooner, her brother would not have died. Jesus responds, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha’s response to Jesus’ statement is that of many believing Jews of the day. “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” To which 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.”

As I thought about this passage, it occurred to me that most of us believe Martha’s proclamation of faith in the resurrection and not Jesus. Jesus is talking about something else altogether. If that is not the case, then what did Jesus give to us that most first century Jews did not already believe?

To Martha’s proclamation of faith in the resurrection on the last day, Jesus says: “I am the resurrection and the life.” He does not say, “just stick around and I am going to prove to you twice that there is a resurrection at the last day so that you can believe.” Martha already believes! Lazarus’ being raised; and Jesus’ death and resurrection are not necessary to make her believe. Jesus is taking her (and us) to a new place. She got it. Do we?

“Lazarus, come out!” It had been four days now. Lazarus had died four days ago. He had been wrapped in the traditional burial clothes and placed in the tomb. By now he was certainly beginning to smell. He was definitely dead—not just in a coma. Furthermore, those around the tomb would have been aware of something else that most later readers probably would not have known. Many Jews of the time believed that the soul or spirit of a person lingered near the dead body for three days after the death, and then it left. By now from anyway you looked at it, Lazarus was indeed dead, and the chances of him coming to life again were well past.

“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.” This is the last and most powerful of Jesus’ signs in the Gospel. In the other Gospels, they are generally referred to as miracles, but in John, they are signs. In John, there are only seven signs starting with the transformation of water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana and ending with this one, the raising of Lazarus. Jesus’ signs in John all point away from themselves. None of them exist for themselves. Jesus does not do any of them to show us how powerful he is. They point us to God and God’s glory. They point us to God’s reality. They point back to Jesus as the one who is from God and can take us to God. They ask us to see and live in a new way.

Martha believed in the resurrection of the dead at the end, on the last day. Jesus changes the tense of the verb from I know that he will rise on the last day to now! “I am the resurrection.” What is happening is more than the resuscitation of a dead body. What is happening is about being alive now! It is significant that it is after this sign that the authorities conclude they must silence Jesus, they must kill him. It is also interesting that they find the raised Lazarus a threat and consider killing him again. They are too much of a threat to them, and their society. It is one thing for people to come to life in end time when whether they are alive or not does not matter much in the schemes of this world. It is another thing altogether for people to be truly alive in God now when they could upset the power, wealth, ways and processes of this world and time.

“Lazarus, come out!” Come out from the grave! Come out from death! Come into life! Episcopal priest and writer, Robert Capon, is reported to have once commented that Jesus never met a corpse that he didn’t raise. Lazarus is no exception. And neither are we.

The Gospel is a whole! Only a chapter earlier, Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Resurrection is the promise of radically new things in this world of ours and in our in life. It is not the promise of riches or power, of leisure or great success. It is not the promise of no pain or loss or grief. It is the promise of life so rich, so filled by God that even the death of the body can overcome it.

But Jesus did not just say, “Lazarus, come out!” He turned to those waiting at the tomb and said, “Unbind him, and let him go.” Surely the one who had the power to call Lazarus from death had the power to unwrap him. Jesus is saying something to us about the resurrected life. Jesus did not do for those who mourned for Lazarus what they could do themselves. The resurrected life is not a passive life or a life lived unto ourselves. The resurrected life is the life of the “communion of saints”. Jesus calls us from death to life. God fills us with his spirit and life. God calls Lazarus from death to life, but Lazarus needs Martha and Mary and his friends to assist in his rebirth. God calls us to new life, but we need our brothers and sisters to assist us. We too are called to assist our brothers and sisters. In fact, I would go so far to say that we are called to new life in Jesus not for our personal bliss but that we may assist others in the resurrected life. We have a part in the healing. We are to be a healing community. We are called to be a transforming community of life. Why do you think that those who profit from death are frightened by the resurrected life and community and seek to destroy it? Those who are truly resurrected are a threat to death and to those who are still slaves to it and its ploys.

I have never read the play, but I have read that in his play *Lazarus Laughed*, Eugene O’Neill has a scene in which the resurrected Lazarus goes to Greece. There in the city square of Athens, he sees the emperor Gaius Caligula, who is speaking about the hatred people feel for him. Caligula says, “Let them hate—as long as they fear us! We must keep death dangling before their eyes. ... I like to watch men die!” Soon after this scene Lazarus is arrested and charged with teaching people to laugh at death. He is threatened with execution. Lazarus laughs softly, “Like a man in love with God.” and he answers, “Death is dead, Caligula! Death is dead!”

On Ash Wednesday, we are called to a holy Lent. The disciplines of Lent have as one of their primary purposes to make us aware of how we are slaves to death and to prepare us to hear Jesus call "Come out." May our Lent may be holy, and may we hear God's call in Jesus to come out from whatever it is that enslaves to sin and death.

Our bodies may be from dust and to dust they may return, but God created us for life and calls us to life.

Amen.

The Rev. William O. Breedlove, II, TSSF

St. Barnabas Episcopal Church

Monmouth Junction, NJ