

Sermon for April 2, 2017
Fifth Sunday of Lent
John 11:1-45
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Pastor Martha Bardwell

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Martha, and then Mary, say these words to Jesus when they first encounter him after their brother has died. They are words spoken in deep grief and pain, and you can hear these sisters wondering what might have been, as so many of us do when tragedy strikes. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” they say. And so we say, in the wake of our own personal or political tragedies, in the silence of our hearts or out loud, we say: “God, if only this had happened; if only he hadn’t said this; or she hadn’t done that; if only I had paid attention; if only they had not been so...” In the wake of death and tragedy we are left wondering over what might have been and sometimes we cast blame on God or on ourselves or others.

It’s into this wake of death and tragedy that Jesus enters the scene. Death is hanging thick in the air, not only because Lazarus has died but because Jesus has a target on his back—he has received death threats from the religious establishment.

Into this grief-filled air, we witness Jesus showing up with the grace and truth and power of God. We witness Jesus giving the gift of himself, of Godself, in profound ways.

One way we glimpse the grace and truth of God is in the tears of Jesus. When Mary approaches Jesus and falls at his feet weeping; when she then offers to show him the place where Lazarus has been laid, Jesus breaks down. He is moved by great emotion, troubled in spirit, disturbed and distressed. Here we glimpse the deep compassion of God, in a stooped over weeping Jesus, overcome.

When I was working with people experiencing homelessness, I had the privilege to type up a book of poetry that one of our guests had written. His name was Rev. Eugene, an African American pastor of the “All Gangster Universal Life Church.” He had written these poems during a long stint in prison—and in the collection there were prophetic poems about the sickness of systemic racism that had made his bones and the bones of America dry; there were mystical poems of praise and lament to God. He wrote one poem that is inspired by this moment in the Lazarus story, when Jesus weeps. I thought it would be particularly appropriate to read his work because we’ve been focusing in adult forum on Christian prison writings as a way of getting at how the real good news of Jesus breaks into broken places. So here’s a contemporary example. To set up his poem I want to mention that in our translation the story reads, “Jesus began to weep” but in some other versions this verse reads simply two words: “Jesus wept.” Here’s his poem:

*The only two words
I've ever heard
The shortest verse
I ever rehearsed
Is Jesus wept...*

*Jesus wept
Before I eat
Jesus wept
Before I sleep
Jesus wept
Over our sins
None of His Commandment
We kept,
So Jesus wept...*

*Jesus wept
At our dinner table
Jesus wept
For the Cains and Ables
Jesus wept
On the Cross
While dying for the Lost
Jesus wept.*

As we hear vividly described in Rev. Eugene's poem, we have a God of boundless compassion, a God who weeps with the grieving, who stares with us into the abyss and knows the real pain and stench of loss, of injustice, of failure. In the tears of Jesus are the grace and solidarity and truth of God.

And yet, weeping isn't where this story ends, is it? Through the tears, in the midst of tears, this weeping God in Jesus offers yet more. Jesus offers abundant life, life that comes even in the thick of death. "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus says. "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

Jesus has come to Lazarus and Mary and Martha, and still comes to us, to offer life and life in abundance, life with God, life that revives us from pits of hopelessness and despair. It is life that keeps us from getting stuck on the past and what might have been, and life that keeps us from getting stuck on the future—just waiting around for the last day of salvation to come. In his conversation with Martha we hear Jesus say loud and clear—this resurrection life, it's now. It's here through faith. It's available for you in my very presence with you.

Jesus shows himself to be resurrection and life by raising Lazarus from the dead and by drawing this whole mourning community into that work of restoring Lazarus—he has others take away the stone, calls others to unbind Lazarus. A community that was stuck in the stench of death now has life-giving work to do.

What does it mean for us to have faith in this Jesus who is resurrection life? A Living Question, to be sure! In pondering this question this week, I was reminded of some words by Dag Hammarskjöld. Hammarskjöld was a Swedish diplomat who served as the second secretary general for the UN before being killed in a plane crash as he was on his way to cease-fire negotiations in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. After Hammarskjöld died, his writings were published in a book called *Markings*, which revealed a deep and mystical faith that animated his life of public service.

Hammarskjöld wrote:

*Tomorrow we shall meet,
Death and I
And he shall thrust his sword
Into one who is wide awake
But in the meantime how
Grievous the memory
Of hours frittered away.*

When I first encountered this passage years ago I understood it to be a mature and sober way of understanding that any of us could meet our physical death any day. “Tomorrow we shall meet, death and I.” The words certainly work on that level. But then I began to hear these words differently. I began to hear the truth that each and every day, we do meet death in some fashion or other, in some fashion that cuts into our being. We meet death when we hear news and see pictures of suffering refugee children. We meet death when those of us who have been taught by society to be ‘white’ recognize how our white privilege separates us from the suffering and humanity of others. We meet death when we face cultural messages that say that because of our gender identity, or sexual orientation, we are not deserving of love and wholeness and respect. We meet death when we are tempted, over and over again, in the face of the overwhelming realities we face, to curl up and play opossum—to ‘play dead’ to protect ourselves from facing the stench of death and injustice. We meet death and we face the temptation to shut ourselves in our tombs, perhaps with some Netflix to pass the time.

But in our very daily meeting with death, a daily meeting that may indeed cut us and cause us to weep with Jesus who himself bears the wounds of death, the Spirit of the Living God comes and meets us. We hear the voice of Jesus reaching us in the tombs of our being—“COME OUT!” Jesus says. “Come out, and live wide awake, live out resurrection faith, resurrection life with God. Stop frittering away your hours in your tomb, dear beloved one.” This God wants to unbind us, and enlists each one of us in the work of unbinding each other.

In baptism we are washed into this wide awake life, this resurrection life. In baptism, we die to sin and death in this world, and we are raised to live resurrection life here and now with God. Baptism is one way we keep awake to God—and a way we practice a communal rolling away of grave stones, a communal unbinding.

And little Loren—you are so alive—like the opposite of dry bones. You are so alive in your little infant self. As we prepared for Loren’s baptism, Iman, Joe and I read from a baptismal book we use by Dan Erlander, and we reviewed the reasons that we baptize children. One reason that stuck out was this:

“A child is part of the human race which is ensnared within self-justifying impulses, self-love run amuck, trusting what is not worthy of trust—all that the Christian faith calls “sin.” Every human needs God’s forgiving and liberating power.”¹

May the forgiving and liberating power of God uphold you, Loren, all the days of your life. And may this forgiving and liberating power continually reach and unbind all of us and call us out of our tombs, each and every day and at the time of our death. Amen.

¹ Daniel Erlander, *Let the Children Come: A Baptism Manual for Parents and Sponsors*, 1996, p. 2.