

Raising of Lazarus

I have to admit I've struggled a lot with this sermon. I'm not totally sure why – sometimes that just happens. But it may also be a recognition that because of our own experiences with death and grief, this Lazarus story can be a little hard to believe. What's it actually supposed to tell us?

Let's start in the middle – with the line where Jesus says “I am the resurrection and the life.” We say that at the beginning of our funeral services. Let's imagine this scene playing out at a funeral. Modern embalming techniques mean we don't have to worry about a stench. And there's never any doubt the person is dead.

In this story, the fact that Lazarus has been in the tomb four days means there was no doubt he was dead. This wasn't somebody who was resuscitated, or who was mistaken for dead. He was dead.

So, when you're at a funeral, do you ever have even a tiny expectation that the person who is lying dead in the casket will sit up and climb out?

Or that someone's ashes will start swirling above the urn and be formed back into the person? No, I'm guessing not.

I don't. I guess I've never tried shouting at the person, “Get up!” I think folks would think I'd lost my mind. But that kind of gives you a sense of how crazy this story is.

Our reaction to death is pretty much what Martha's was – someday, when the dead are raised, our loved one will also rise. In the meantime, their soul resides in heaven with Jesus. That reassurance gives us comfort. But we don't expect that resurrection to happen right then and there.

When someone we love dies, especially prematurely, we can relate to Mary and Martha. When someone dies, especially someone who is young, we might find ourselves wondering what the sisters did – where were you God? Why didn't you heal my child, or spouse, or sibling, or parent?

Why didn't Jesus heal Lazarus, whom he loved?

And, if Jesus knew he was going to raise Lazarus – which the first part of the story suggests – why did he weep for him?

Those questions are part of why this story is important for us. Because they are questions we have to face when someone we love dies. But rather than ask why Jesus wept, let's ask, what does it mean that Jesus wept?

There's more than one level to that answer. But first, it tells us Lazarus's death was real. This incident wasn't something that was staged for Jesus to show his power.

And grief is the normal response to death. We can put our hope for our deceased loved ones in Jesus and resurrection, but that doesn't take away the grief. Tears are a normal reaction and when we don't allow ourselves to grieve, it causes all sorts of problems.

And it's also ok to question God – why doesn't God heal all the kids with cancer? Or prevent terrible accidents or protect everyone from evil actions? We may never get a satisfactory answer, but God can handle our questions, and even our anger.

Lament is a powerful response to tragedies that attack our sense of how things should be. Kids should outlive parents. Parents should live long enough to see their kids grow up. Pandemics shouldn't kill six million people worldwide, many of whom might otherwise still be alive.

We join Mary and Martha in our lament. Lament for all that's gone wrong and leads to death.

The Psalms are full of lament. There's a whole book in the Old Testament called Lamentations. All of those are an acknowledgement of the reality of death and destruction.

And grief and lament need to be allowed for as much time as a person needs. There's no timeline. But our grief is not without hope. This story is sort of a fast forward – there is hope in resurrection. But we still need to allow grief.

So, here's the next level of this story. Lazarus was raised right smack in the middle of time and not in some far-off last day. Lazarus is a preview of what's also going to be true for Jesus. And, he is a preview of what will ultimately be true for us.

The message in that part of the story is that resurrection does play out in our lives in the here and now. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, that last day – that resurrection day – has broken into our lives now. Jesus said I am the resurrection and the life.

Life with Jesus...relationship with Jesus... extends beyond the boundaries of death. And that has a real impact on our lives now.

That's hard for us to grasp – that now and not yet. I think that's what makes this story hard to preach. We are living in the new age... and yet we will die. It's now and not yet at the same time.

But what does that actually mean for us?

I think the last line of the passage helps us with that. It's a little more concrete. Jesus says, unbind him and let him go. Lazarus was wrapped in strips of cloth. There were no embalming techniques then. The body was anointed with oils and spices to mask the odor of decay, then bound in strips of cloth. It made walking hard...but then they weren't expected to walk.

So Lazarus needed to be unwrapped...unbound.

I think that's what resurrection means before we die. Being unbound from the things that bind us. So, think for a minute about the things that bind us.

Maybe you're bound by guilt over something. Maybe you're bound by shame from past trauma. Maybe you're bound by addiction – yours or someone else's. Maybe you're bound by anxiety over the world situation. Maybe you're bound by seething anger. Maybe you're bound by depression or other mental illness...or physical illness...or an aching sense that you're not good enough.

Unbinding of all that is what Jesus does.

But notice that the cloths binding Lazarus didn't just fall off. People unbound him. I think that's an image of what the church should be.

Too often in the church, we either ignore the things that bind people, or worse, we judge people who are bound.

We come here on Sunday, and everyone puts on their I'm OK face and when we ask each other, how are you doing, we say fine. I'm fine is an expected response to how are you? That might be ok when you run into someone at the grocery store, but here, we would better serve this unbinding by saying, I'm not fine, when we're not.

Church should be the place where we can bring those things that bind us and let them be unbound.

As the church, we are given the authority to offer forgiveness, healing, reconciliation – in short, unbinding. We are called to be the place where all can experience unbinding...and really, resurrection.

But always, the starting point will be recognizing the reality of grief, suffering, pain...and sometimes, our best response is simply to lament together.

