

"Love Leads Through Death to Life"  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
Fifth Sunday in Lent  
Edina Morningside Community Church; March 18, 2018

**John 11:1-44**

*Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."*

*When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "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." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "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. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."*

*When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "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."*

As anyone who's seen my office knows, I am what you might call "organizationally-challenged". It's not that I don't know how to stay organized, but when push comes to shove in my schedule, I prioritize spending time with people or working on a project deadline rather than keeping my office straightened up. I tell myself there will always be time for that later. As a consequence, each week adds another layer of notes and paperwork to the piles on my desk, like sediment on a river bottom. I have every good intention of coming back around to sort them, but the next week brings its own busy-ness and another layer of sediment covers up the previous one. It's gotten to the point now that I have four large piles on my office desk, starting to crowd out the space I have to actually work! I'm trying yet another strategy to address it, but I'm tempted to just throw a sheet over it when people come in for meetings, to pretend that everything is just fine, "nothing to see here, move along".

I recently realized the emotional impact of this disarray. Javen was starting on our taxes last week while I was at church, but he couldn't find that most basic thing needed, my W-2 form. I could have sworn I took it home and put it in the file where it belonged. Since he didn't find it there, I became an archaeologist sifting through the layers on my desk. Below yellow pages of meeting notes and to-do items, beneath blue prayer request slips and white stacks of unopened advertisements, I found it, in an envelope clearly marked, "Tax Information". My relief at finding this essential paperwork soon drowned in a flood of self-critique. I told myself that a good pastor wouldn't be this way, wouldn't get so swamped in the flotsam and jetsam of ministry as to lose even the most basic things, important not just to me but to Javen also. My inner voice pointed out the failings in all those layers as I sunk into the deadly quicksand of shame, blame and hiding from myself. In the words that Saint Augustine uses for his own state of overwhelm, "I had become to myself a vast problem".

I'm not laying this out there to elicit either sympathy or your best advice for better organizing. Rather, I name it because I suspect that we *all* have things of which we're ashamed, things that we want to hide under a shroud, things that make us want to crawl into a hole and disappear. Are there situations in your life that feel just as deadly? When I put a picture of this Lazarus story on Facebook, an acquaintance mentioned that it reminded him of his alcoholism. For someone else, it might be another addiction too embarrassing to name. Perhaps it's mental illness or physical weakness that has you hiding from yourself. Maybe it's dysfunction at home, children who don't fit the image of suburban perfection, or an inability to speak your truth. Where are the places of shame and binding in your life?

We don't like going there, do we? It feels vulnerable and unnerving, maybe even deadly. We want to hide from such places, to cover them up. I think about a woman who was interviewed for Eve Ensler's [Vagina Monologues](#), talking about her "down there" as a boarded-up basement. She says, "It's very damp, clammy. You don't want to go down there. Trust me. You'd get sick. Suffocating. Very nauseating. The smell of the clamminess and the mildew and everything. Whew! Smells unbearable. ...It's closed up, under the house. It's down there."

This is the same instinct Martha shows in today's gospel story when Jesus goes to open the tomb of her brother Lazarus. Even though she believes that transformation is possible with Jesus, Martha doesn't want to face the very real aromas of decay. She tells him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." But Jesus doesn't fear going into the places of death. His mission is one of throwing open doors, spreading curtains wide, lifting windows, and letting the purifying light shine in. This is the path of healing, through facing vulnerabilities and coming out the other side. Such love leads us to face the truth of death, then leads through death to life itself. As the very wise Elaine Kirkland told me in discussing this text, "We have to be willing to stink to rise again."

This dynamic happens not just at the time of death, but throughout all of life as well. Jesus promises Martha, "Your brother will rise again", and she replies, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." And Jesus says back, "I am the resurrection and the life." Footnotes in a study Bible point out that some ancient copies of John's gospel leave off the end of Jesus' reply here. [In a](#)

[WorkingPreacher.org](http://WorkingPreacher.org) podcast, Rolf Jacobson suggests that later biblical scribes perhaps thought Jesus was being redundant since of course “resurrection” means “life”, so copiers occasionally put down only the first part: “I am the resurrection”. But that misses the point of this story, the point of Jesus’ ministry, and maybe even the point of Christian faith altogether. Yes, we believe that by some mystery beyond our knowing there is life beyond the grave, where the love of God can be known and shown most fully. But Lazarus is healed to *this* life, restored to himself, family and community in *this* life. Jesus shows the power of God to make a way where there seemed to be no way, not just in the hereafter, but in the here-and-now. We are given glimpses of life in the midst of death, even before the final curtain, and the even-more-final eternal encore.

This is the part of a sermon where I’m tempted to tell a heartwarming story that demonstrates the gospel’s hopeful rebirth. Maybe a reference to spring would be in order, witnessing the new buds of this season after deadly winter. There are places for such stories and metaphors, but I suspect that it’s a shortcut to tie everything up in ribbons and bows. Most of us are all too aware of our shameful places and stinky death, yet still hoping and groping for a life of gospel promise which is harder to see. The story of another’s resurrection may not be enough for you in your place of hurt or trial. We continue on the road of love together, through death to new life, but we don’t always have it figured out in time for Sunday morning, including your pastor.

So if you came to church this past week and found my door mostly closed, or found me less able to engage in undistracted conversation, it’s not a judgment on you by any means. It’s me trying to dig through my piles, trying to find some organizing in the chaos, trying to find the way from darkness into light. With you, I too am trying to receive the love of God that passes all understanding, love that leads through death to greater and more lasting life. Trying to understand what the UCC theologian Paul Tillich describes as accepting that we *are* accepted by God, despite our own feelings of inadequacy.

By divine grace, we do not have to do this by ourselves. Mary and Martha had Jesus and the whole community to help them make sense of such loss. We have one another, here in this community of mystery, wonder and hope. The church, Christ’s ever-living Body for this time and place, may likewise be called to cry out for life in places of death. As we all continue to listen for a space of grace in places of shame and death, we together manifest the voice of Jesus to those around Lazarus: “Unbind him, and let him go”. Part of our joyful calling as Christians is to stand athwart the entangling inner voices or outer critics and cry out, “Stop! Death is not the last word—not ever, and not now, in this life. So unbind him, and let him go.” Unbind her, and let her go. Unbind me, and let me go. Unbind our communities—contorted by racism, gun violence and all the rest—unbind them, and let them go. Unbind our neighborhoods, unbind our communities, unbind our country, unbind the world, unbind this whole groaning and God-blessed creation—that it and all who are within it may go free. “Jesus, unbind us, and let us go!” Amen.