



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 2 – Proper 7 Year C

The Tombs

[RCL]: 1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a; Psalm 42 and 43; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

For years he haunted the tombs. The living dwelling in the places of the dead. He might as well be dead. No one remembers his name; they can barely register that he is a human being. “Crazy” they call him. Reduced to an ailment and haunted by demons. So, he wanders the tombs, naked, alone, neglected, ashamed, forgotten, afraid. Never knowing peace, never knowing human decency, never knowing love, miserable. He is, entombed and tied down by his mental illness, by societal neglect, indifference, dead to any sense of real living.

But he is a person. Once he knew what love and compassion looked like. Once he knew what companionship and hope felt like, but now he doesn’t recognize his own name. Legion, he calls himself, because so many problems and illnesses have taken up residence in him that Legion is all he knows. He knows that people of the town fear him and yet they are intrigued by this specter who runs around naked chatting loudly to himself. He knows his place and the people of the town are happy to remind him where he belongs. He has become commonplace, routine, a part of the scenery.

So, he haunts the tombs. The barely living in the places of the dead. The townspeople are happy to have him there, at a safe distance. No matter how bad things may get, no matter what life may bring, at least they are not like Legion. They keep their crazies safely secured in the tombs and they prefer it like that. They have made peace, and are almost proud, of the town crazy.

Then Jesus shows up in the place of the tombs, the place of the dead. In that moment, everything changes. “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.” Even with the many voices in his head, he recognizes Jesus, he recognizes new life. No longer is he Legion, he is seen and known, a beloved child of God. Once Jesus sees and knows him, healing follows. The man comes to his right mind, puts on clothes and wants to follow Jesus. As is custom in small towns, word spread quickly that the town crazy is no longer crazy, and people are scared. What frightens them? They are scared that Jesus will upset the way things are. They are scared that a man formerly known as Legion might have a name and a past and a future.

They invite Jesus to go away because when you raise the dead from the place of death, fear has a way of creeping in. Jesus and his disciple pack into the boat and prepare to leave. But the former demoniac begs and pleads to go with Jesus. He wants to be a disciple, to know better this Most High God who recognizes him, even when his own people cannot. But Jesus wants him to remain, to tell the story of his healing, to spread the good news among the people who only knew him as the man who ran naked in the tombs. He is a living parable of the power of God to transform even the most broken and neglected into beacons of hope. Hope can be scary.

So, he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

When we have made peace with living in the tombs, when we have been chained down and held back, when we are naked and afraid, Jesus steps in and points us to a new way, a new beginning, a new creation, and it scares us! The thing is that Jesus is always showing up in the places of death and dying and transforming them for new life, for new hope, for new beginnings. Jesus sets us free from the many ties that bind us and the tombs that claim us so that we can proclaim with our lives the Good News of a God who, in the face of death, whispers new life. “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” is not just the prayer of Legion, but our prayer as well.

It can be all too easy to make peace with the demons that torment us – racism, alcoholism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia – the list is legion. But God never intended for us to dwell in that space. God imbued us with dignity and worth and purpose and calls us to discover the same in others.

When we have become comfortable with the way things are, when we have made peace with death-dealing in our politics, our faith, and our society, it is precisely then that Jesus offers us healing, offers us hope, and offers us wholeness. But do we really want to be healed? Do we really want things in our lives, in the church or in our world to be different? We fear what we do not know. Fear holds us back, ties us down and keep the stench of death about us. We don't really want the way we live to be interrupted or disrupted. Healing and wholeness, redemption and resurrections are scary because they mean a different way of life, a new order, a new reality, a new creation has arrived. So, we often find ways to cling to the familiar tombs we have long haunted.

The thing is we do not have to go far to find the tombs. There are those outside, and perhaps inside, our churches, simply wanting to be seen and heard and given the dignity of any human being. They are those who long to experience healing and compassion in a world that is often too busy to be concerned with those dwelling in the tombs. They are those who spend their days and nights in the places of the dead of their own creating, who long for a word of encouragement or hope.

As a church, we must ask ourselves, what demons torment us that we have allowed to become overly comfortable and familiar? What tombs do we continue to wander when Jesus calls us to the places of resurrection and new life? What fear is holding us back from welcoming Jesus fully in our midst?

If we are honest with ourselves, we have all spent time in the tombs – the tombs of anger, loneliness, loss, despair, mourning – and now we live in our right minds. Which means we have Good News to share because, like the former demoniac, we can tell of Jesus' healing in our lives. We can tell the stories of transformation and renewal that brought us to this new day. We can tell the wonder-working power of a God who will not ever let us go, who seeks us even when we can't recognize that we are lost.

When we are ready, willing, and able to hear Jesus' invitation, then we the church will experience new life, new hope, new inspiration. We must be willing to be bold enough to leave the tombs behind, to loose the shackles that keep us tied and tethered and to do the same for others. The problem with being healed and made new is that the familiar ways of doing and being will no longer apply. And that is Good News! When we experience the joy of being healed and made whole, the only response we can give is to proclaim what God is doing and has done for us.

Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you. So, we go away, proclaiming throughout the cities and towns, hamlets and villages, how much Jesus has done for us. Amen.

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