



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent 5 (A)

No One Asks

[RCL]: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

No one asks Lazarus if he wants to be resurrected.

That's the fascinating part about our gospel story today. No one asks if he wants to return to a broken and hurting body, tangled relationships, and the responsibilities of his finances and his job and his family. He was a good man. No doubt he had gone straight to the bliss of union with God. What a terrifying and awful feeling, to be yanked back down to Earth with such suddenness. Many people who have near-death experiences return to life with a new sense of purpose, with joy and awe at the knowledge that there truly is something in the beyond and it is so beautiful and loving.

But for everyone who returns with joy and purpose, there is someone else who returns with a profound sense of despair and rejection. "I saw God," they say. "I saw God and felt God's love and experienced heaven's peace, and God threw me back. God didn't want me. God saw fit to return me to this petty human life in this small, limited human body. How could God do that?"

Which group was Lazarus in? Was his reaction thanksgiving or disappointment? We don't know, because Lazarus never speaks in the gospels. He probably couldn't get a word in edgewise with his sisters around.

But nobody asks Lazarus if he wants to be resurrected. And nobody asks us. Lazarus was Jesus' friend. And it turns out, resurrection is the price of friendship with Jesus.

Resurrection is scary, because the price of resurrection is responsibility. Once we have been brought back to life by Jesus, we have a mission to accomplish. We are compelled by the miracle to share with others the truth that they too can experience this radical rebirth. We strive, even knowing that it all is a free gift of God's grace, to act in some way that is worthy of the enormous cost and sacrifice that Jesus made to help us attain it.

We seek to honor the gift by honoring the giver, and we honor the giver by honoring God's presence in one another. Pretty words for a very difficult task. It really would have been easier and much nicer to stay dead. Dead, we're in eternal bliss with God. Resurrected, we have to begin the journey anew, the journey

of loving, of failing, of forgiving, of trusting, of the whole mess of joy and pain that this human spiritual life is.

The other question that torments many people who read this text is why Jesus let Lazarus die in the first place. It's the same question the disciples and the townspeople are asking themselves. It's the same question Mary and Martha ask him directly when they see him, Martha running out to demand why his love wasn't strong enough to come when they called him, Mary hiding away because she fears her anger will overwhelm her and she will lash out at him. They both make the exact same accusation: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

How many times have we asked the same question, sometimes in rage, sometimes in sadness, sometimes in confusion, sometimes in despair? Lord, if you had been here, my child would not have died. Lord, if you had been here, my ability to pay my bills would not have died. Lord, if you had been here, my church would not have died. Lord, if you had been here, my marriage would not have died. Lord, if you had been here, my sobriety would not have died. Lord, if you had been here, my faith would not have died.

What a painful truth it is, to discover that Jesus is not going to ride to the rescue in shining armor on a white horse. Mary and Martha discover it. Lazarus discovers it. The disciples discover it. Jesus will not save us from the Cross, because he will not save himself from the Cross. And he will not save us from the Cross because straight through the Cross is the only path to resurrection.

It's no easier for him than it is for us. Jesus weeps in this gospel. He, a respected spiritual teacher in this community and on top of that the Son of God, loses his composure completely. The pain he feels as he witnesses some of the people he is closest to on Earth suddenly question their trust and love of him, question their belief in him, look at him with disappointment and anger in their eyes because they believe he has failed them—it hurts. But he will not spare himself this pain, nor will he spare Mary, Martha and Lazarus their pain, because it is through that pain that they must travel to reach the day of resurrection.

So it is for us. We have one week left to decide if we are going to Jerusalem with Jesus or not. We have plenty of time to back out. Next week is Palm Sunday, and very soon the joy of walking with Jesus and seeing him heal and feed and teach so many people, the joy of experiencing him heal and feed and teach us, will start to have a very steep price. Suddenly we are being asked to go somewhere very dark and scary, a place where the authorities are crashing down on all sides, where the once loving crowds turn against us and him, where we discover to our bewilderment that we are shouting for his crucifixion with the crowd. He will be arrested, he will be tried, he will be convicted, and he will be executed.

And we have a choice whether or not we will witness it. The first disciples split down the middle on this choice. Most of them ran away. A few of them stuck it out all the way to the foot of the Cross and laying him in the tomb. Most of the ones who talked the biggest ran the fastest. Jesus loved them anyway.

We can run, too. We can skip straight from Palm Sunday to Easter Day, figuring, well, it's all going to work out in the end, why put myself through all that depressing crucifixion stuff and the terrible long week leading up to it? Jesus will love us anyway.

He will. He absolutely will. But we will never taste the fullness of resurrection until we go to the Cross with him. We can stay safe. We can stay dead. We can keep our eyes closed and our hearts no longer beating and our bones and spirits as dried up and motionless as the dry bones in Ezekiel's valley. It will be peaceful. And it will be empty.

Or we can go with him. We can pray and read scripture and live in community every day of Holy Week, walking with Jesus in real time through the last week of his life, bolstering our courage by sticking together, refusing to give up, no matter how hard it gets. We can face the truth that we can be rescued from pain or we can be resurrected to new life, but we cannot have both.

Jesus letting Lazarus die and then calling him back to life was a gift to Mary, Martha, Lazarus, the disciples, and us. He is about to go through the same process, although with much, much higher stakes and a great deal more pain. But he lets us see what will happen ahead of time if we go with him. He shows us that first of all, there is life on the other side of death, and second, that is true not just for the Son of God, but for regular people, for the friends of Jesus, and that is us. The first thing he says when Lazarus walks out of the tomb is, "Unbind him, and let him go." We too can be unbound, unbound from our fear, from our lies, from our grief. No one asks Lazarus if he wants to die, and no one asks him if he wants to be resurrected. Each is the price of the other. No one asks us, either—and yet the question remains. On the other side of that question are freedom and life abundant.

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