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St. Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

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

Called to Unbind One Another

John 11:1-45

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 Judeans 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 Judeans 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."

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 Judeans 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 Judeans 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 Judeans 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 person, 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." Many of the Judeans, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did believed in him.

Sometimes, it feels like we live in the valley of dry bones. Every day brings a new catastrophe in our world—a new war, a new injustice, a new disaster. There are questions and needs that no one is addressing. The news cycle is exhausting, and then you add the quieter, more personal losses we carry—the unwelcome job changes, the relationships that end, the financial uncertainties, or the unsettling diagnosis. It feels like a deep valley with no end.

So we ask: What hope is there to find? What future lies before us?

We are not the first ones to ask these questions. The people of Israel too felt like a valley of dry bones. In the time of Ezekiel, Jerusalem had fallen and the people carried off to exile in Babylon. Everything they thought was secure had been stripped away. What hope was there to find? What future laid before them?

You can almost hear their cry:

"If you had been here, Jerusalem would not have fallen."

“If you had been here, God’s people would not be in exile.”

It sounds familiar, doesn’t it? I hear the echoes continue in Martha and Mary, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

And that cry has echoed throughout the ages:

“If you had been here, war would not have happened.”

“If you had been here, the land would not have been decimated.”

“If you had been here, the baby would have been born, the marriage would have lasted, the storm would not have come, disaster would have been dodged.”

If only. If only.

If only things had happened differently, we would not be in this valley of dry bones, we would not be gathered around this tomb. If only things had turned out differently, this grief would not be ours to carry.

We live so much of our lives in that space, wishing things had been different, believing that if circumstances had changed, then suffering could have been avoided.

And Jesus hears the “if onlys” and he weeps with us. He joined Mary and Martha in their grief, weeping at the tomb as only a friend can. He stood at his friend’s tomb, surrounded by grief and loss - and he did not explain it away. He didn’t reprimand a lack of faith, even though he had heard the right answers.

Jesus doesn’t rush past easy answers. Instead, he weeps.

He hears the “if only” and feels the weight of what has been lost. Jesus stands with us in the valley, at the tomb, in the place where hope feels buried because *our grief matters*. It’s not something to be fixed or avoided, but it is a place where God meets us.

But this is the hard truth: even if Jesus had been there, Lazarus would still have died. Maybe not that day. Maybe not at that moment. But someday. The death rate, as they say, remains the same—one per person—so even though Lazarus was raised from the dead, he would still die.

This is all part of the journey of life. The story of our lives is not a journey *around* death, but a journey *through* it. It’s just like the bear hunt: Can’t go over it. Can’t go around it.

Gotta go through it. Not only the final death at the end of life, but the smaller deaths we experience along the way—the deaths of expectations, identities, relationships, dreams.

But the good news is that death is not the end of the story. Death is no match for the God of life. God is always in the business of bringing about new life.

In his prayer for peace, Francis wrote, “It is in dying that one awakens to eternal life.” Resurrection is not possible without death.

That is something we resist. We want resurrection without loss. We want new life without letting go. We want glory without the cross. Yet the truth remains: resurrection is not possible without death. So when we deny death, we also deny the possibility of resurrection.

Jesus said, “If you believe, you will see the glory of God.” [See Note 1] Not because it takes our faith for resurrection to happen, but because faith gives us eyes to see the new life of resurrection when it comes.

So the question becomes, what needs to die?

It takes the death of easy answers
to make way for deep, life-giving truth.
It takes the death of old ways of living
to make way for abundant life for all people.
It takes the death of cherished expectations
to make way for greater hopes and dreams.
It takes the death of who we thought we were
to make way for who God created us to be.

But we are not to face it alone. In the midst of death, God calls us to the work of resurrection. We cannot do the work of resurrection ourselves—that is the work of the Spirit—but we are called to join in.

Just like the Lord told Ezekiel, we are commanded, “Prophesy!”
Just like Jesus told those gathered to mourn with Mary and Martha, we are commanded, “Unbind those who must emerge from their graves.”

We are called to love, which sometimes means first weeping alongside someone, just as Jesus did.

We are called to speak life, proclaiming words of hope and peace.

We are called to participate in freedom, setting others free from the systems that entangle.

We are called to unbind one another from whatever still holds us in the grave.

We unbind when we forgive.

We unbind when we tell the truth.

We unbind when we walk with someone in their grief, not making it about us.

We unbind when we stand in solidarity with those who experience injustice.

And we are given what we need for that work.

We come to the font, where we are unbound from all that hinders us.

We come to the table, where we are fed and strengthened for the journey ahead.

We are sent out to bear witness—speaking hope in the face of despair, naming life in the presence of death, proclaiming the goodness and mercy of God.

Because even in the valley of dry bones...

 even at the mouth of the tomb...

 even in every hardship that threatens to bury us...

God is still bringing life. And even though we are still in the season of Lent, it's enough to make me say, "Alleluia." Amen.

Note 1: John 11:40