



*What Is Your Binding?
John 11:32-44*

*All Saints' Worship Service ~ Sunday, November 4th, 2018
First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois
The Rev. Dr. Forrest Krummel, Jr.*

Text: Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go". (v. 44b)

In the village of Bethany, two miles from the city of Jerusalem, a certain man named Lazarus lay ill. He was the brother of Martha and Mary. You may remember that Mary was the woman who anointed Jesus with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair. Jesus loved them.

The sisters sent word to Jesus saying that if he wished to see Lazarus alive he needed to come quickly. Jesus delayed, though, as we are too often apt to do. When he finally decided to go to Bethany the disciples protested. The last time Jesus went to Jerusalem, he was nearly killed. Bethany was simply too close, too dangerous. But Jesus would not be dissuaded. So, Thomas, the one who is often called the "Doubting", said to the others, "Let us go with him so we may also die alongside him." I've often wondered why this part of Thomas's story is not remembered. I've often wondered why Thomas doesn't have the moniker of "Courageous Thomas". It seems to me that "doubt" and "courageous faith" are two sides of the same coin, but that is for another sermon; a confirmation sermon. So mark your calendars for the first Sunday after Easter - Confirmation Sunday - to hear that sermon.

Anyway, as Jesus neared Bethany Martha went out to meet him to tell him he was too late. Lazarus was already dead. The African American preachers of an earlier day often said that God may not come when we want or expect, but God is never late. God is never late. The story of Easter tells us that Death cannot have the last word. Death is simply the penultimate never the ultimate. It is the chapter before the final chapter is written.

Martha told her sister Mary that Jesus wanted to see her. She immediately threw off her mourning shawl and ran to Jesus, followed by a surprised band of mourners. Coming to Jesus she fell at his feet and then in a voice that I do not believe can be read as anything other than accusative, said, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died."

How many times in our own life do we blame God for something that happens? A destructive storm or earthquake is called "an act of God". We ask God "Why did this happen to me? to my loved one, to my neighbor. Like Job we demand a hearing before God. But maybe "Why did" is the wrong question. Maybe we need to ask, "Why shouldn't this happen to me?" What makes us think that we are exempt from the trials and tribulations of life, the hardships and tragedies of life? What makes us think that we are somehow inoculated against evil in the world? If anything, we should be more ready for it. After all, didn't Jesus warn us that if we wish to be his disciple that we must pick up the cross and die? We who have been given so much are expected to do more. That is both the call and the cost of discipleship.

When Jesus saw Mary weeping at his feet and the mourners weeping he was deeply moved. And when they told him where Lazarus tomb was, we are told that Jesus himself wept. I truly believe that God weeps with us in the midst of our sorrow. I believe that God suffers with us in our suffering. I believe that God often looks down upon this world that was created good and wonders at the Creation. I believe that God often weeps over our inhumanity to one another and destruction of the good Creation. Unlike the gods of the ancient Greeks and Romans, or the gods that have to be appeased with sacrifice, we have an intimate caring God who carefully created us in the Divine image and knows our pain as well as our joy because God became one of us in Jesus whom we call the Christ.

Now we must understand that while each of the gospel were written with a certain point of view, they all had the same purpose. As the gospel of John says in the last verse of chapter 20, “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that believing you may have life in his name.” (v. 30) I want us to remember this because the story of Lazarus parallels the story of Easter. Like the Easter story Lazarus was buried in a cave and a great stone was rolled in front of the cave. Jesus told the mourners to move the stone away from the mouth of cave. In the story of Easter, it was the power of God that moved the stone.

When Jesus told the mourners to remove the stone, Martha—the ever practical one—protested. “He has been dead four days. There will be an order.” I love the way that the King James’ Bible says it, “He stinketh”! What a wonderful phrase! Nevertheless, Jesus was insistent. The stone was rolled away and Jesus called to Lazarus in a voice loud enough to wake the dead, “Lazarus, come out!” And Lazarus came stumbling out, like a zombie or a mummy bound in the wrappings of the grave. “Unbind him,” Jesus commanded, “and let him go.”

Several years ago I read an interesting reflection on this story. I cannot find the source, though I wish that I could. The author raised an interesting thought, was the Lazarus who came out of the tomb the same as the Lazarus who went into the tomb? Or was he changed? I think that it was the latter. Isn’t it true that on the other side of Life’s trials and tribulations, we are forever changed? Aren’t we forever changed when someone we love doesn’t love us any more, or someone we trusted betrays a trust, or someone that we spent more than half of a lifetime with dies, or when our job is outsourced and we are no longer young, or when a child gets terminally sick. The list is endless. But aren’t we forever changed? I believe that coming out of that tomb Lazarus was a little worse for wear. I believe that he bore the marks and scars of the grave.

This story, I believe, reminds us that God is with us not only on the mountaintops but in the deepest darkest valleys of life. Even when we do not feel God’s Presence, God is there right beside us. God’s love never lets us go. And by Grace, God gives to us a Peace that passes all human understanding. By Mercy and care, God knits us together into a community of faith, a family of faith to do the work of God’s Kingdom here on earth. The communion table from which we will receive the elements of the sacrament reminds us of God’s Presence. It reminds us that God journeys in Life with us. In the comforting words of Jesus, “Lo, I am with you until the end of the age.” (Matthew 28: 20) Amen.