

Easter Sunday
“Come Forth!”
John 11:17-44

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It is sometimes assumed that this scene of Jesus’s raising of Lazarus was merely preparatory to his OWN resurrection event, that it was a dry run in anticipation of his OWN resurrection on Easter morning and the empty tomb. However, I tend to have a DIFFERENT take on it. The Gospel of John is full of contrasting signs and symbols, many of which you do not find in any of the other gospels- light vs. darkness, flesh vs. spirit, life vs. death, good vs. evil. The fact that the raising of Lazarus occurs at the exact mid-point of the gospel and at the very juncture where Jesus begins preparing himself for his Passion is not without significance for this account of our Lord at Lazarus's tomb is the actual CENTERPIECE of John's gospel. For four days, Lazarus lay bound in grave clothes, his body at the bottom of a deep, dark cave. Almost four decades ago, I was in Bethany at what was supposedly Lazarus's tomb, and if that WAS the place (and it is certainly questionable), there are steps that take you down about forty feet to the bottom of a dark pit. It would have been at the top of those steps where Jesus stood and summoned him from out of the darkness of death back into the light of life. With this raising, John was making a statement about the Christian life in general. He was painting for us a picture of that which has occurred in each of our OWN lives, how when dead in our sins and blind to the goodness of God, we TOO heard the voice of One call us from out of our OWN tomb, whether it was a tomb of loneliness or a tomb of rejection or a tomb of anger or a tomb of fear or a tomb of sorrow or a tomb of unbridled passion. Somewhere in our heart of hearts, we heard the gracious command from Christ himself declare for US to “Come forth and be loosed!” Stirring to new life, we stumbled from out of the stale, fetid air of our sarcophagus still bound in our graveclothes, into the bright light and fresh air which accompanies all TRUE deliverance.

As a Bible teacher, I want to back up this claim by briefly looking at three episodes in John’s gospel. If you read John’s book from beginning to end in a single sitting and focus in on every mention of a dwelling place, whether of a room, a chamber, a house, a building, or a domicile of some kind, you’ll begin to see how for John such references often become symbolic of a tomb or a mass grave that is inhabited by “dead” persons. Now when I say “dead,” I don’t necessarily mean physically dead as I do SPIRITUALLY dead- persons who are DEAD to the truth, DEAD to love and human empathy, DEAD to faith and to joy and to hope. Those who inhabit such dwelling places are living, but dead. They are in essence walking, talking cadavers whose lives are governed by unrelenting pride or greed or lust, lives dominated by such feelings as fear or guilt, anger, or despair. They are empty, joyless, self-serving individuals who in the eyes of God are no better than breathing corpses.

The first reference to a house or building I want to direct your attention to occurs in the second chapter of John, when Jesus enters the great Temple of the Jews and drives the sellers of oxen and sheep and doves, and the moneychangers out. He then angrily exclaims, “Take these

things away; stop making my Father's house a house of merchandise." Herod's Temple with its massive stonework and magnificent porches was the most important building in all of Israel and the symbol of Judea's social, religious, and cultural system. It was the grandest, most beautiful structure in all the country, and it symbolized the authority and wealth of the Jewish priesthood which had become exceedingly rich at the expense of the poor. Theirs was a financial empire built on graft, extortion, bribery, and loan sharking in the Temple place. At the time of Christ, the sacred area around the Temple had become an open-air bazaar where sellers shouted their wares, cheating unsuspecting customers with the priests getting a large piece of the action. Jesus had JUST CAUSE to feel outrage when he scourged the moneychangers and merchants, accusing them of transforming his Father's House into a den of thieves. This was, no doubt, one of the main reasons Annas and Caiaphas and the other Sadducees wanted Jesus dead- his cleansing of the Temple represented a grave threat upon their prestige but also their REVENUES. With his growing influence and following, Jesus threatened the status quo, the established order from which they had all profited so handsomely.

What is often described as Jesus's "cleansing" of the Temple was nothing less than his utter REPUDIATION of it. He didn't just nail "95 Theses" upon its front door in the hope of starting a great reformation like Luther did. NO! The entire religious system was DISEASED and ROTTEN to the core. It had become a gigantic cemetery and those who participated in it, those who contributed to its corruption, were nothing short of DEAD THEMSELVES. What Jesus did was place a huge "This Place Is Condemned" sign on its entranceway and publicly declare that it might as well be torn down for all the good that it did.

But Jesus did MORE than judge the religious leaders and the system they had perverted- he also offered them the opportunity for new life, HIS life. Just as he had stood before Lazarus's tomb and commanded his dead friend to come out, burial clothes and all, so did he now stand before the massive front gates of that great Temple and with a loud voice call out to any who had ears to hear to "COME FORTH AND BE LOOSED!" He summoned them from out of the tomb the priesthood had come to represent and urged them to experience the fresh air of honesty and the sunlight of justice that had become so foreign to them. Though the summons to arise and abandon their tombs of pride and arrogance and selfishness and greed went largely unheeded, there were at least TWO persons who heard it. We are told in the very next chapter that a member of the Sanhedrin--a man named Nicodemus--was intrigued enough to approach Jesus, even if by night, to talk to him; and that another of that group--one Joseph of Arimathea--would later become his strongest ally and even offer up his OWN grave for Jesus to be placed in.

Friends, that same summons goes out to EACH OF US when we find OURSELVES caught up in a system or institution that is oppressive or unjust or even dehumanizing. For instance, we all know that racism and sexism, antisemitism and homophobia remain deeply entrenched sins in our society and in many of our OWN attitudes. Well Jesus summons us to "COME FORTH AND BE LOOSED!", that is, to divest ourselves of them and to preserve the values of fairness and human dignity over and against a cost benefit world which honors the bottom line of the almighty dollar above all else. He calls us to abandon an ethics that preaches we must "win at any cost" and "the one who dies with the most toys wins"- what Christ would

call an “ethics of DEATH.” He calls us to raise our voice and to take a stand in the name of FAIRNESS when there is discrimination, and PEACE-MAKING when everyone else is mindlessly clamoring for war. When we remain silent in the face of such dishonesty and injustice because we would rather not make waves and rock the boat, because it would jeopardize our job security, we then demonstrate just how conformed we have become to the world and show just how dead we REALLY are.

A second episode I want to look at occurs in John 11, our New Testament text. John makes the point of emphasizing that when Jesus arrived at Bethany, the home of Lazarus, Martha immediately rushed out to meet him while MARY REMAINED IN THE HOUSE. She stayed in the home surrounded by mourners who had gathered to console her over the loss of her dear brother. Martha then called to her sister to join her as Jesus was asking for her. When Mary finally DID come out, she fell at his feet and exclaimed, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Seeing her deep grief, Jesus HIMSELF became troubled.

By remaining in the house, John makes Mary a symbol of one imprisoned by her deep sorrow and inconsolable grief. She is so blinded by her tears that she is unable to see the hope represented by Jesus’s presence in her midst. She remains SO overcome with sorrow that she never does hear his words of assurance, “I am the resurrection, and the life; whosoever believes in me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” Church, our OWN grief can become so overwhelming at times that we even despair of LIFE ITSELF, so bereft of hope that we would rather die OURSELVES. Sure, it is normal for us to experience SOME degree of sadness in our lives- it can even produce a most beneficial effect. Again and again, I have seen its capacity to open and expand people's sympathies, to allow one to become more sensitive to the sorrows and sufferings of others. However, when we MARRY sorrow and make it a PERMANENT GUEST in our home, it can be destructive, even DISTORTING our personality. I have seen it ruin many a marriage and friendship, causing one to become excessively pessimistic or bitter or suspicious. We may try to avoid it by drinking or drugging ourselves into forgetfulness. We may even indulge ourselves in every kind of sensual pleasure hoping that the thrill of the moment will hide our sadness.

Some years ago, I was invited to address a group called Compassionate Friends, a support organization which ministers to parents who have lost a child. Afterward, I spoke to one woman—the head of the group—who began to convulse and sob uncontrollably as she spoke of the death of her young son. It just broke your heart to listen to her until I discovered this son of hers hadn't died within the past year or so, but FIFTEEN years before. It seemed that every meeting had become another opportunity for her to resurrect her son and experience his death all over again. For all those years, she had been unable to let go of him, to put the past behind her and get on with her life. Well, as Jesus stood at the entranceway to Lazarus’s tomb, calling him to come forth into the fresh air and sunlight of new life, he no less stood before the tomb MARY had found herself in, calling her out of HERSELF, out of her deep grief and inconsolable sorrow which had become her prison cell, that she might experience the bright light of faith and the fresh wind of hope whenever Jesus Christ--the “resurrection and the life”--is present.

My third text is found in John, chapter 20- the scene in which the disciples have gathered

on Easter evening in the Upper Room WITH THE DOORS AND WINDOWS LOCKED FOR FEAR OF THE JEWS. They believe that as their Master had been arrested and executed, they were NEXT on the Enemies List. And so, like Saddam Hussein who was caught cowering inside a hole, they sought safety and security inside their OWN hole, in what had become their TOMB- bereft of faith and hope of any kind, afraid for their lives. It was THEN we are told that Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst announcing to them the words they most urgently needed to hear, "Peace be unto you."

This scene reminds us that no prison is so large or so strong as to keep Christ out, that he can burst into our most private chambers--whose door and windows we keep shut--and throw them wide open, allowing the fresh winds of faith and hope and love to fill it once again. He can penetrate every heart governed by guilt and loneliness and anxiety and despair and transform it with same reassuring words he greeted his disciples with, "Peace be unto you." He offers us liberation, which is what "salvation" essentially is, from all the terrors that bind and imprison us, which rob us of those qualities that make life meaningful and rich. He can turn OUR Upper Rooms, OUR own private chambers of guilt and grief, and transform them into gardens teeming with life and vitality and excitement and possibility and mission once again.

When we think of resurrection, we tend to think only of the hope we have that after we have died and our flesh has turned to dust, that the day will come when Jesus Christ shall raise us up and give us NEW bodies- ones that will NEVER die. We look to that great cosmic event awaiting us in the far-off distant future. But there is ANOTHER resurrection which we TOO OFTEN overlook that takes place in our lives PRIOR to our longed-for physical resurrection- the resurrection of our HEARTS, the transformation of our THOUGHTS AND ATTITUDES, the renewal that goes on in our NATURE when we discover the power of Christ's love for our lives in a FRESH NEW WAY. This resurrection occurs in the PRESENT--now while we yet live in the flesh--when the old self dies and is put away and a NEW self, a TOTALLY NEW creation, is put in its place. This resurrection is the creation of a new heart, a new soul and spirit that changes us so that we are NEVER AGAIN the same persons afterwards.

And so, for John, the raising of Lazarus that takes place in our text this morning becomes a very important symbol for the church. It is descriptive of that which occurs to EVERY person who places his or her trust in the Lord. John wants the reader to know that even as Jesus had the power to call forth Lazarus from out of his tomb and to unloose him from the chains of death, so too will he raise any and all of US who place OUR confidence in him- and not just from the physical death Lazarus experienced but from all EMOTIONAL and SPIRITUAL deadness AS WELL. As Christ called forth Lazarus from his sepulcher with the words, "Come forth!", he no less summons us from out of our OWN tombs- out from the walls of sensuality and selfishness and pride, out from our joyless, guilt-ridden, anxiety-filled lives which imprison us to our old nature and old ways. And as he commanded the bindings to be removed with the words, "Be ye loosed!", he likewise promises to deliver US from all that which binds and prevents US from experiencing the fullness of God's love and peace and joy. Lazarus thus becomes a very important symbol to the church- of Christ's WILLINGNESS and ABILITY to raise each of US up into new life with him and equip US with new desires and new attitudes.

This morning, Christ come to seek US out even as he did his own sorrowing disciples so long ago. He knows all too well the private hurts and the personal battles being waged inside each one of us. Regardless how fine a Christian we may be, we STILL find ourselves beset by guilt or anger, by grief or fear, by loneliness or despair of one sort or another that we can't get rid of or seem to let go. We find it suffocating our faith, strangling our spiritual growth, inhibiting the fruit of God's Spirit from DEVELOPING FULLY in our lives.

During my first pastorate, there was one member of the church who was the very PERSONIFICATION of "fear." She was afraid of EVERYTHING- afraid to leave her home, afraid to drive her car, afraid of being alone, afraid of strangers. She was a very kind individual but her life was dominated and paralyzed by fear to the extent that it caused her to become negative and pessimistic about everything. Her closest friends often found it unbearable to be around her. One day, she confessed to me, "David, I don't know what it is but ever since I was a child, I was afraid." Though we often talked about it and prayed over it, she still could not bring herself to allow Christ and her church family to minister to her in this area. She remained convinced that she would remain a very fearful, pessimistic person right up until the day she died- and she DID.

Another member lived in constant fear that she had or was about to develop cancer. Her father and sister had died from the disease, and she had had a bout with it some years previously. But the doctors had removed it all and over the years had given her a perfect report. Yet, this fear so dominated her life that it caused this once vibrant and attractive schoolteacher to live on the constant edge of a nervous breakdown. The nerves in her face began to collapse from the tension and so she now spoke with a heavy slur. She would call almost on a regular basis and ask me to pray with her, that she was convinced that the cancer had recurred. Yet, every test would reveal what the doctors couldn't convince her of- that she HAD no cancer.

These are examples of people BOUND, of two church members IMPRISONED by negativity and fear. Believe me when I say that the church rolls are FULL of such persons- of those who can't let go of their griefs, their fears, their guilt, their negativism, their anger. Well, this morning, Jesus commands US, even as he did to Lazarus, "COME FORTH AND BE LOOSED!" BE LOOSED from your fears which paralyze your will! BE LOOSED from your griefs which rob you of Christ's joy! BE LOOSED from the despair which kills dreams and hope and new possibilities! BE LOOSED from that guilt that cripples your spirit and drives you further down inside yourself! COME FORTH AND BE LOOSE this very morning! For Jesus is both WILLING and ABLE to set us free from that which inhibits our faith, from that which robs us of his peace or steals from us his joy. His desire is that we be WHOLE Christians, RESURRECTED Christians and in this way, WE will demonstrate the reality and power of Christ's resurrection at work in our OWN lives this day forward. Let us pray...

Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, you sent your son into the world to deliver us from ourselves- from our OWN graves and the imprisonment that comes with years of guilt and anger, of grief and fear, and of loneliness or despair that suffocates faith, stunts lives, and prevents us from experiencing the TRUE life you desire for us. Lead us into the new light and fresh air that comes when we open our hearts and live in the revitalizing presence of Jesus Christ himself. In

his name we pray, amen.