

“Unburdened & Unbound”

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John 11:1-44

Fourth Sunday of Lent

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Prayer...

In my time as a pastor, I've had a lot of conversations with people who are feeling perpetually overwhelmed and inadequate. They have taken on too much, they have over-promised, they are stretched too thin, and a great weight is crushing their spirits and making them feel defeated. When I hear about this, it's less like a complaint and more like a confession in need of an assurance of pardon. It's almost always accompanied by a real sense of guilt. These folks feel that they are letting people down: themselves, their partners and families, the church, or even God.

In many cases, even when someone has set down one burden, they are quick to take on another one in its place. It's self-perpetuating cycle fueled by internal and external expectations that we are somehow superhuman: we can take on all things, we can accomplish all things, only we can do these things, and to not do this is to become weak, fall short, disappoint, and fail. Anything less than superhuman is unacceptable.

Bound up by these expectations, we suffer from a crushing weight that hastens a kind of spiritual death. We long to be unbound, for that weight to be lifted, to be liberated and resurrected. But from our vantage point from beneath the giant boulder that has become our life, we can only imagine that same stone sealing our tomb.

When I read the story of Jesus raising his beloved friend Lazarus, I begin to wonder if Jesus ever felt the same way. I think Jesus was caught in a bind, though I don't really think this is what the author of John's Gospel was trying to convey. This is most certainly me reading myself into the story.

Theologically speaking, this narrative is the ultimate healing story and the foreshadowing of Jesus's own death and resurrection. The raising of Lazarus is meant to serve as inarguably convincing proof that Jesus is the Messiah — publicly performed so that others would finally see and believe.

Jesus and his Disciples are holed up in Jerusalem following an incident in the temple where Jesus narrowly escaped an attempt on his life. The religious authorities — rocks in hand — were preparing to stone him for blasphemy. He slipped from their grasp, but the threats to his life were mounting by the day, and he could only hide for so long.

While at their hideout, messengers arrive from Mary and Martha, to tell Jesus that their brother, Jesus's beloved friend, Lazarus is ill and close to death. This was the same Mary that would anoint Jesus's feet, symbolically embalming him. It would not be too far a stretch to say that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were what we'd now call Jesus's "family of choice." And so their urgent request was not out-of-line: Could Jesus please journey to their home, just a few short miles away in Bethany of Judea? Surely, Jesus could get there in time to save Lazarus, whom Jesus loved. Mary and Martha believed — and rightly so — that Jesus could quickly and easily accomplish this miracle if he so chose.

But Jesus did not feel a sense of urgency: "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."¹ Not only did Jesus not jump up and strap on his sandals at that moment, he didn't even go later that day or even the next day. But not because he didn't care about Mary, Martha, or Lazarus. As John writes, "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."²

Can you imagine what the scene was like? The Disciples stood there confused, whispering to each other. Why is Jesus not rushing off to Lazarus? The messengers expected to escort Jesus back to the family home. So, uh, Jesus. Are you gonna come with us? Mary and Martha were pacing around the house, holding vigil, every second ticking by like an hour, but surely every second bringing Jesus closer to their home and their brother closer to life. But no. Jesus waited. In fact, the word used in the scripture implies that not only did Jesus waited, but he "tarried." He dawdled around. Maybe caught up on some back issues of the Daily Jerusalem Gazette. To all those around him, it sure looked like Jesus was procrastinating. Jesus did this for two days. Two. Whole. Days.

¹ John 11:4

² John 11:5-6

Of course this was not the same kind of procrastination as your typical mortal, though it seems to be just as frustrating to those who had certain expectations of him to deliver on his promise. Jesus purposely delayed so that Lazarus would die and he could revive and raise him — literally, in the flesh — not simply spiritually resurrected “on the last day” when the kingdom of God was established, but on that day, for all to see. Jesus was pushing the limits of his power, but would soon demonstrate that — through God — his power was limitless. That sort of holy confidence is the divine nature of Jesus. It is a power and a mystery far beyond human comprehension — or at least my human comprehension.

Finally after two days Jesus heads out toward Lazarus. Though the journey would be short, it was not guaranteed to be easy. If any part of Jesus’s delay was due to some hesitation about his safety, that is certainly understandable. The Disciples weren’t exactly encouraging him to go, recalling that Jesus had just narrowly escaped an attempt on his life days earlier, surely there were people actively looking to harm him. So by leaving his hideout by the Jordan and traveling to Bethany of Judea, Jesus is putting his life at risk — both along his journey and through what he is planning to do. This is Jesus literally and willingly risking his life for the life of a friend. And he is doing this so that God might be glorified through his actions. His responsibility to fulfill his purpose as the Messiah compelled him onward.

Jesus stopped off in Bethany, still about 2 miles away from Lazarus’s home. Again Jesus delayed. Hearing this, Martha rushed to meet him. Through her grief, tinted with a shade of anger, Martha confronted him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Then maybe embarrassed by her bluntness, she backedpeddled a little and invoked her faith in Jesus, “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”³

Although she was proclaiming that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, I’m not so sure how deeply Martha believed that at that moment. Still, it seemed to bring her comfort.

But then Mary arrived — just as aggrieved, just as frustrated, disappointed, and indignant as her sister, but unwilling to profess her faith in Jesus’s promise of everlasting life. Mary did not mitigate her sadness and anger. Collapsing at Jesus’s feet, Mary cried out the same accusatory lament as her sister: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

³ John 11:20-22

I think that's the moment where Jesus's humanity begins to break through. Scripture says that, "When Jesus saw her weeping, and [those] who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved."

Here, the words used for "disturbed in the spirit and deeply moved" have the connotations of being angry. Some writers say Jesus was angry at death and sin, others say he was angry at his Disciples and Mary and Martha doubting him. I wonder if there was any part of Jesus that was angry at himself. Did it weigh on him — all those expectations? Did it crush him? Did he regret waiting two whole days before he left to see Lazarus? Did the prospect of this ultimate miracle justify disappointing and angering his friends Mary and Martha? Was it worth it to put his life at risk?

I wonder if there were times that Jesus did not *want* to be the Messiah. If he did not feel up to the task of bearing the sins and burdens of the world, if he wished that he had just stayed in Nazareth and taken up the carpentry trade like Joseph — hiding his light under a bushel basket, avoiding fulfilling God's purpose for him. Could you blame him? There are days that I retreat in my mind to an escapist fantasy, feeling like even the burden of cooking dinner is just too much to bear. Certainly, I am not cut out to be the Messiah — and thankfully no one expects me to be. So how unimaginable is the weight of expectation that Jesus carried? I have to think that the human Jesus was sometimes tempted to collapse under that weight.

I think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane as he awaited his arrest. Scripture says Jesus was grieved and agitated, throwing himself on the ground and praying *three times* for God to "remove the cup before him" — to spare him from what was to come.⁴ Knowing the torturous and gruesome pain that lay ahead of him, Jesus called on God not for courage and strength, but for a way out.

And now with Mary and Martha, "greatly disturbed" and "deeply moved," Jesus wants to see Lazarus. "Show me where you laid him." I don't read confidence or bravado in this request. I don't hear it as a bold demand. Rather, I sense the grieving resignation of someone who has just lost a loved one, and they are now prepared to view the body. I hear these words whisper-spoken in a shaky voice, lips quivering, legs unsteady.

⁴ Matthew 26:36-46

Jesus makes his way to the tomb of his beloved friend, with Mary and Martha by his side, the piercing and judgmental eyes of the skeptical and cynical onlookers dissecting his every move. And there, Jesus was overcome with emotion, again “greatly disturbed,” as he arrived at the tomb. Then comes the shortest and one of the most poignant verses in all of the Bible:

Jesus wept.

I wonder if in that moment — if even for just a moment — Jesus felt despair. I wonder if Jesus surrendered to death, seduced by the siren song of resignation to the power of death. It seems like that was what the gathered mourners thought as well. Seeing his emotion as weakness, the onlookers deride and taunt him: “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”⁵ Jesus would hear those same mocking sentiments just days later as he hung on the cross, languishing — the religious authorities, passersby, even the two men crucified to his left and his right: If you are the Son of God, save yourself; “let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him.”⁶

Back at Lazarus’s tomb, that did not matter. For whatever amount of despair and self-doubt Jesus experienced in that moment, it did not last long. Jesus might have felt beaten, but he was not broken. He was not defeated. Drying his eyes and clearing his throat, Jesus — confident now in his power and purpose commanded, “Take away the stone.”⁷

Jesus may have claimed his authority, but even Martha was not yet convinced. See, by this point Lazarus had been dead for four days. According to Jewish tradition, the soul leaves the body after three days.⁸ Lazarus was deader than dead — in body and in spirit. He had been anointed with oils, his hands and feet bound in strips of linen, his face shrouded, his body overtaken by the natural process of decay bearing all of the physical signs and sickly-sweet pungent odors of more than half a week of death. A skeptical and realistic Martha cautions Jesus — “Lord, already there is a stench.” Or as the King James Version puts it, “He stinketh.”⁹

⁵ John 11:37

⁶ Matthew 27:38-44

⁷ John 11:39

⁸ Dear, p. 51

⁹ John 11:39b

But the stone is rolled away. Undeterred, Jesus stands before the open tomb — the stench of death wafting over him, taunting him, even; Mary and Martha anxiously waiting; the onlookers scornfully doubting. Jesus looks upward, calls on God, and “[cries] with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’”

Again, imagine the scene in that moment right after Jesus’s command. Absolute silence. Bodies frozen in anticipation. Eyes unblinking. Jesus thinking, “Dear God, I hope this worked!”

Just like when Mary and Martha awaited Jesus’s arrival, seconds tick by like hours.

And then the sound of feet shuffling, legs restricted by bands of cloth. Perhaps some guttural groaning and moaning from the reawakening of limbs seized by rigor mortis. And then he appears: Lazarus at the entrance of the tomb — disoriented, confused, the sun stinging his eyes through the shroud. He lives. Yet he remains bound.

Then Jesus commands the stunned onlookers: “Unbind him, and let him go.”¹⁰

When trying to understand scripture and make it relevant for life today, I find it helpful to try to locate myself in the different characters within the narrative. Who am I in this story? Who are you in this story? Who are we in this story? Most often, our identification swirls and cycles through multiple characters, given different contexts or different days.

Today, we are the Disciples:, hyper-vigilant and shaken, confused and confounded. We are Martha: grieving and deflated, but desperately trying to be buoyed by our faith.

We are Mary: Raw with emotion, let down, disappointed, even angry when someone has not met our expectations.

We are Jesus: Bearing the weight of those expectations, recognizing the gravity of fulfilling our commitments, sometimes wanting to cast them off or at least delay.

Or we are Jesus: Confident and bold, overcoming the impossible in the face of skeptics, surrounded by the specter of death.

We are Lazarus: Languishing and waiting for a miracle, seemingly defeated, but then renewed, revived, and unbound.

¹⁰ John 11:44

Author and former Jesuit priest Father John Dear writes that, through the raising of Lazarus, Jesus has proclaimed three new commandments:

1. Take away the stone
2. Come Out
3. Unbind

We are to remove the stone that has entrapped us in the tomb. We are to come out away from the way of death and toward the way of life. We are to be unbound, liberated and set free. According to Father Dear, for the author of the Gospel of John, God sent Jesus to usher in and lead the way to “the fullness of life here and now.”¹¹ Jesus cries out “Lazarus, come forth — so that we might leave behind all the tombs of death and walk freely in the reality of a resurrection already realized.”¹²

Jesus’s commandments to take away the stone, come out, to unbind and be unbound breathe new life into our tired, weary, weak, and worn bodies. We are revived, renewed, and resurrected. So listen for Jesus calling you out by name: “Come out!”

Whatever stone is before you or upon you, may it be rolled away.
Whatever burden or seduction lures you toward the way of death, may you come out and be beckoned toward the fullness of life.
Whatever ties ensnare you in suffering and despair, may you be unbound.
Amen.

¹¹ Dear, John “Lazarus, Come Forth: How Jesus Confronts the Culture of Death and Invites Us in to the New Life of Peace” Orbis, 2011. p.16, p.2

¹² Dear, p.4