

“No Tomb Too Deep”
John 11:1-45
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Well, here we are in the last Sunday in the season of Lent, or so it seems, since next week is Palm Sunday, which, although it is one, doesn't feel like the other Sundays in Lent. I hope the season has been spiritually formative for you, that you have undertaken some sort of discipline that has deepened your awareness of the need for Jesus Christ in your life and in the life of the world. On the first Sunday of Lent, I suggested to you a possible Lenten practice to undertake for these forty penitential days. I suggested that we “play dead,” that we examine our lives for those places where death seems present, where there is decay or violence or neglect, places where the spectre of death seems to be lurking, and to look for the sin associated with it, either your own sin, or someone else's sin, which is affecting you. Admittedly, those can be scary places to go. We shy away from death, we avoid looking at our own sin, we'd rather not dwell on the sin done to us. But those places of sin and death are the ones that hold us back from being happy, that cause us to grieve too long or too hard, that create rifts in our relationships, and keep us from doing our part to bring God's peace into a broken world.

Death is, not surprisingly, a key theme in the Biblical passages we use during Lent. The whole thrust of human history, and the Biblical story itself, drive us toward the violence and death of Good Friday, and we are reminded along the

way that sin is a progressive disease that can only lead to death, ours and everyone else's. Of course, the relationship between sin and death is not necessarily one of direct cause and effect where the death of our bodies is concerned, although we often do take our lives in our hands as we sin. If you work for the Mafia, if you deal drugs, if you steal from people, you may very well lose your life in the process of intentionally practicing the art of sin. But that is not how Lazarus found himself in the tomb. He died not because he was a great sinner, but because he was simply a sinner like the rest of us, his body succumbing to life outside the Garden. Even so, his experience is useful to us as we reflect on the sin that leads to death of all kinds, the kinds I suggested we pay attention to during Lent.

To recap briefly the very long story we read from John, Jesus learns that his good friend Lazarus is gravely ill when Lazarus's sisters send word. For reasons that become clear later, but that confound the disciples, and cause Mary and Martha much grief, Jesus decides to wait until Lazarus has died to go visit him. Upon arriving, he speaks with Martha, who offers her confession that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of God," upon hearing Jesus proclaim that he is "the resurrection and the life," and then with Mary who reminds him that Lazarus has been dead a full four days and is beginning to stink. Finally going to the tomb, Jesus is deeply moved, and orders the stone rolled away from Lazarus' tomb. After offering a prayer of thanksgiving, he utters the famous words, "Lazarus, come out," and out comes the dead man, still wrapped in his grave clothes.

Now you may be wondering about Jesus' odd behavior which has him both casually waiting until Lazarus has died to come to him, and then weeping upon seeing the tomb of his dead friend. It seems rather obvious that the thing to do would have been to go to Bethany and simply cure him and spare everyone the agony, and us the question. But, Jesus must be Jesus, especially as he is presented to us in the Gospel of John and so, everything has to be a little more mystical and mysterious. Besides the fact that for Jesus, it didn't matter whether Lazarus was dead, or for how long, there are two main theological points to be shared by having Jesus wait. The first is to make very explicit the link between Lazarus' death and Jesus' death, and what Jesus' death means for the world. In each of the Gospel stories, there is an incident which provokes the Jewish leaders to finally decide that Jesus must go, that they must find a way to kill him. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, that incident is the so-called cleansing of the temple, where Jesus drives out the moneychangers from the temple grounds with a whip of cords, and proclaims that they have made his father's house a den of thieves. However, in the Gospel of John, that final incident is the raising of Lazarus, an act so scandalous, not to mention powerful, that Jesus can no longer be ignored. Jesus had healed plenty of people of sicknesses and long term ailments, but raising someone from the dead was just a little too much, and so the plot begins, and we'll hear how that turned out on Good Friday. All of this is what is behind Jesus' statement about Lazarus' condition that "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.” That is exactly right: Lazarus’ *illness* does not lead to Jesus’ death. It is Lazarus’ *death* that leads to Jesus’ death, and it is precisely Jesus’ death which glorifies him, as he accomplishes what he has come to earth to do. Remember that in the Gospel of John, it is Jesus’ death which accomplishes God’s purposes more so than his resurrection. No wonder he delayed going to see his friend Lazarus.

The other opportunity created by Jesus’ delay is his conversation with Martha, which would not have taken place were her brother still alive. Martha is a person of great faith. Even though her brother has died, she still believes Jesus can do something about it: “But even now, I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” And with that confession, Jesus is able to take their conversation to the next level by telling her that “Your brother will rise again.” And a resigned sounding Martha replies by saying, “Yes, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day,” seemingly deflated that Jesus has not yet done something even though she has reminded him it could still happen. But Jesus does not let her remain simply at the edge of recognition, but draws her in all the way: “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?” Jesus takes her general and abstract notion of resurrection, and personalizes it, grounds it in himself, and declares that all roads to life pass through him. “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the

world.” Perhaps Martha already believed that, but maybe she couldn’t have arrived there without her brother’s death.

And so, with the stage set for Jesus’ own death, and with Martha proclaiming what all of us are called to proclaim, Jesus at last turns his attention to Lazarus, and calls him forth from his tomb. There is not a lot of detail about Lazarus coming back to life, but what there is is worth noting. The first thing is that Lazarus has not just died, like other people whom Jesus has raised, like Jairus’ daughter, people about whom it might have been said that they were simply in a coma, or that their spirits had not yet completely fled the scene, as was believed happened after the third day following death. No, this is the fourth day, he’s in the tomb, the door is sealed, and he is beginning to stink. Lazarus is most definitely dead. But even though he is quite dead, Jesus doesn’t see fit to order others to take Lazarus out of the tomb and lay him down so he can breathe on him, or lay hands on him. No, Jesus calls Lazarus out, makes him wake up from his deathly slumber, and rise, and walk out of the tomb under his own power. You see, as most certainly dead as he was, he is now most certainly alive, given not only life, but power and energy to exit his place of death. He is now bound only by bands of cloth, and they too will come off, leaving him free to rejoin his family, his community, his life.

We know, of course, that Lazarus’ reprieve was just that, a temporary reuniting with his life and family. He went on to die again at some point, and to wait for that resurrection on the last day about which his sister spoke, but about

which none of us know very much. As far as we know, the only one to be resurrected and stay that way was Jesus himself. But Lazarus did get a reprieve, and very likely came to understand what Jesus explained to his sister about life and death. In case it had passed you by, nowhere in the story does Lazarus confess his faith in Jesus. Nowhere does it say he deserved what Jesus did for him. Jesus simply did, in part because he loved his friend, and in part because he loves us all. The point here is that sometimes we come back from the dead because we have learned about life in Christ, but that sometimes we learn about life in Christ because we have come back from dead. Like Lazarus, we each have our tombs, and in those tombs are buried the parts of us that have died. Some of our tombs are fuller than others, God knows how close some of us are to having all of ourselves stuffed in there, but each of us has something there, a dream at least, or a relationship, or a future. Lazarus was only in there four days, but some of our stuff has been in there for decades, but that doesn't matter. You see, there is no tomb too deep that Jesus can't call us out from, no tomb too ancient, or dark or humble that escapes his power and mercy. In the end, all that binds us are strips of cloth, not the tomb, not death. You see, "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Jesus went to his tomb that we might escape ours, both on that last day, but also right here and right now. Jesus was glorified that we might see glory, both on that last day, but also right here and right now. Jesus has brought all things together in himself, that we

might be made whole and one in him, both on that last day, but also right here and right now.

So here we are on the last Sunday in Lent, a season in which we are called to look into those tombs which hold parts of us that are waiting to be called back to life. Those tombs are scary places. They contain what we fear most, and what we have no control over. But what is in there is worth going in for. The good news of the Gospel is that in the end, as we enter in to confront our fears, to come to terms with our sins, we do not enter in alone. We do not enter in without the possibility of return. No, we have someone standing at the doorway, crying out in a loud voice, “Beloved child, come out!” You see, you can’t enter so deeply into Lent that Jesus can’t call you back out. May God give us the strength and the courage to go where we need to go to find healing and wholeness and life. Jesus said, “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?”

Amen.