

LENT: A Time to Fill Your Cup

Part 5: Unbind the Bound

Raising of Lazarus

John 11:1-45 Ezekiel 37:1-14
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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In *your* opinion, is the story of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead a story based in historical reality? Would you say it is a true story? Is there a difference between fact and truth? For several hundred years now, those of us living in the West have been conditioned to equate the two. **As the thinking goes, for something to be true, it must also be a fact.**

The paradox of progressive Christianity, however, is being able to discern *truth* being revealed in and through a story while not getting bogged down in arguments over whether the story literally happened the way it was written or not. **While historical elements may be present, progressives believe biblical authors, especially the gospel writers, used language what was primarily and intentionally metaphorical and symbolic, not literal.** A progressive approach to biblical interpretation, in fact, declares literalness isn't really the important issue anyway, but rather: **What is the meaning to which the biblical author hoped to point?** This is the premise of how *Jesus Seminar* scholar **Marcus Borg** deals with the issue of biblical interpretation from a progressive perspective in his 2002 book entitled, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally*.

By the way, if you lay somewhere in-between the literal and metaphorical, or just don't know, that's valid as well. In other words, **don't let the improbable and implausible literalness of this or any other biblical story lead you to disregard it all together.** For like the entirety of the Gospel of John itself, this particular story has a deep richness to offer in understanding God, understanding ourselves, and understanding the role of the community of faith.

Admittedly, this very long story in John 11 about the raising of Lazarus has numerous important theological, pastoral, and practical issues that deserve a great deal of study and reflection. You are probably most familiar with verses 25-26, commonly recited at memorial services, where Jesus said to Martha, **"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." **This powerful statement is meant as a word of hope, especially to those who grieve, declaring that there is life after this life.**

There are indeed parallels between this story and Jesus' own death and resurrection. So this story serves somewhat as a preface and anticipation that foreshadows the Easter story. But as I will explain in a moment, the Lazarus story isn't

really about resurrection, it's about the physical resuscitation of a corpse, which is very different.

This story also speaks compassionately about Jesus' sorrow over the death of his friend. It contains the shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept." It serves, therefore, as a testament to God's compassion and sorrow. I've often mentioned to someone who has lost a loved one, especially under tragic circumstances, that God was the first one to shed a tear.

Today, however, I'd like to primarily address just one small element of this story, a detail that is most often overlooked completely in the process of getting caught up in all the miraculous goings on. In dramatic fashion, this story ends with the words, "Jesus 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.'" It's not hard to picture this scene, as if it were in a movie, or a painting. Here's the part we often miss. **It is Jesus, of course (hence God) who performs the miracle, bringing Lazarus back to life after resuscitating his dead and decaying corpse.** But who is it that actually unbinds and releases Lazarus from that which has him bound tight? Let me repeat the verse, "Jesus said to *them*, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'" (Italics, mine.) **It is the action of Lazarus' family, friends and community that frees him from being bound. Person who are bound tight cannot free themselves on their own, they need help.**

Jesus did his part, then commands the gathered community to do its part. *Our* part, as a community of faith, is to help remove that which binds others, helping to release them from that which entombs them. **Jesus gives us a crucial and active role in helping to bring liberation, wholeness, freedom and new life to others, especially each other.** In fact, if you are a member of College Hill you are automatically a de facto member of the Congregational Care ministry team. Being bound, metaphorically, can mean by things such as sin, or alienation, or prejudice, or oppression, or addiction, or poverty, or loneliness, or low self-esteem, etc., is unable, according to this story, to unbind himself or herself without help from others. **What binds the ones you love?**

In all reality a day doesn't go by when we don't encounter someone who is bound. The question is, what are we doing to help – as individuals or as a congregation? As a congregation, for example, whenever we are able to reach out with an open and welcoming hand to others, providing a safe place of sanctuary and hope, we are involved in the process of unbinding. Each and every time we work to improve the life and well-being of others, like through striving for equality and respect, we are working to unbind those who are bound by injustice. This is a vital part of our congregation's mission. And in connection with our Lenten theme, **it is in and through these acts of compassion for those who struggle in life, that helps us to fill our cups.**

Now, this story of Lazarus is also a powerful one concerning our own liberation. **It's a coming out story, so to speak, from that which entombs you, entombs us.** Coming out from whatever it is that keeps us from being the people that God created us to be is not easy. There are any number of psychological issues, socialization issues, mental health issues, political issues, religious and spiritual issues, whatever, that can make us feel like we're the ones, referencing our Old Testament reading from Ezekiel 37, living in that **valley of dry bones** – in need of God breathing new life into us.

So if you are the one who's bound, and I encourage you to reflect on that, this story of coming out and finding liberation should bring you and each of us much hope.

The story of Lazarus must become a parable for us in the sense that it must become our story. To quote biblical commentator **Veronice Miles**, we must:

“...continue to pray and work for the power of resurrection in the lives of persons and communities bound by the grave clothes of war, genocide, poverty, disease, systematic abuse, and systematic oppression.

[There are people today, perhaps yourself, who,] “...**require caring communities** that are willing to nurture and strengthen them until they are able to walk alone; **to remove the grave clothes of self-doubt, social isolation, marginalization, loneliness and oppression; to tear away the wrappings of fear, anxiety, loss and grief, so that unbound women, men, and children might walk in dignity and become creative agents in the world.**”

We are called to live life fully, and to help others experience life to the fullest, as well. So if I were to paint a picture of this story each one of your faces would appear in the crowd, **standing ready as a community of faith to respond when Jesus commands us to either “Come out of the tomb,” or “Unbind each other, and let them go.”**

Be willing to engage in this ministry to unbind the bound. Be willing to allow yourself to be unbound and set free as well.

Amen.

Resource:
Feasting on the Word