

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

I'm going to go out on a limb a little bit this morning with our Gospel text and make a connection with the end of John's Gospel that I have never noticed before, and that I'm not entirely sure of, at least in one particular. But even if I'm wrong about that particular, I think this episode of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead is clearly foreshadowing Jesus own resurrection and the events that follow, and that this connection can help us both in living out of our baptismal identity and in preparing for Holy Week and our Easter celebration.

I've mentioned a few times already during this season of Lent that our Gospel readings this year from John, and especially today's and the past two Sundays' texts, have long been used to prepare adult candidates for baptism. In the story of the Samaritan woman at the well they learn that Jesus is the source of living water, and that this is not only for his own people, but for all people. Then in last week's text of Jesus giving sight to the man born blind, they learn that Jesus is the light of the world, and that those who come to trust in him start to see the world in new and different ways than those who have not yet received the gift of faith. Finally, in today's text, they learn that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, and that this has implications not only for their life after death, but also their life before death.

Okay, so all of that is pretty well-established teaching about baptism in the church. Here's the going out on a limb part. At the end of our very long reading today, after Jesus has called Lazarus back from death to life, he tells those standing near him, "unbind him and let him go." What's going on at the surface level, of course, is that Lazarus has been wrapped in bands of cloth, because that's what you do with a dead body before you burry it. And if you have been wrapped up like that, there was never an expectation that you would need to be unwrapped, and certainly no provision for unwrapping yourself. So Lazarus would need someone else to "unbind him," the community gathered around him. But in John, of all the Gospels, there is always more than just the surface level, always a deeper meaning. We saw that with Nicodemus and the idea of being born again and from above. We saw it with the Samaritan woman and the idea of living water. Last week we saw it with the idea of blindness being applied to the Pharisees in an ironic twist at the end. So, I think there might be a deeper meaning here in today's text when Jesus tells them to remove Lazarus' grave clothes. The "unbind him" part is about freedom, being liberated from what holds you. And if the deeper meaning here connects with baptism, as I think it does, then this is about being liberated from those powers that are renounced in baptism, the powers of sin, death, and evil. But there might also be something else. The "let him go" part that comes at the end uses a word that is also used for forgiveness, which is also a part of baptism and new life in Christ. So, I want to talk now about both forgiveness and faith as they play out in this story, and then see how they play out at the end of the Gospel.

A key element of today's story is Jesus' delay at the beginning. A messenger comes to tell him that his friend Lazarus is seriously ill, and instead of rushing to his side, Jesus waits two whole days. And Jesus says that the delay is in the service of getting Jesus' disciples and friends to believe in him. So Jesus waits, even though he loves Lazarus and his sisters. And it feels like an offense to his friends, even if it is serving a larger purpose. The purpose is to make sure that by the time Jesus gets to Bethany, Lazarus is, to quote a certain Munchkin coroner, not "merely dead," but "really most sincerely dead." Within three days, in this culture, there was thought to be always the possibility that a person could come back to life. Because it sometimes happened. They didn't have the technology that we have to see what was going on inside a person. So, Jesus' delay is to make sure that there is no doubt about Lazarus' death, and also no doubt about Jesus raising him from the dead and not merely healing him.

But let's keep our focus on forgiveness here, and also faith. When Jesus finally gets to Bethany, Martha meets him and says, "if you had been here my brother would not have died." It feels like an accusation, doesn't it? It's the kind of thing we say when tragedy strikes. If only. If only I had done something differently. If only you, Jesus, had come when we called you! Could we entertain the possibility that Martha, and Mary too when she repeats Martha's words exactly, are angry at Jesus, that in their eyes he has been an unfaithful friend? And, dare we think it, that Jesus needs to be forgiven this offense if their friendship is to continue? Hold the thought.

Jesus' response to Martha is to tell her that Lazarus will live again. Martha has heard Jesus teach, and she believes in resurrection after death. So, she lets Jesus know that she believes that. But Jesus means more than that. He means that he is the source of resurrection and life on *this* side of the grave as well as the other. And Martha *says* that she believes that. Then Mary comes and repeats Martha's accusation. And her weeping, and the weeping of those around her, betray a lack of confidence that Jesus' identity as Messiah has anything to do with their dead brother right now. And our translation says that Jesus was "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" by their grief. We tend to read this as Jesus being empathetic. But biblical scholars point out that this could actually mean that Jesus is angry, fed up with their failure to believe in him, and to recognize him for who he really is. If that is so, then there is more forgiveness needed in this relationship, isn't there? Jesus will need to forgive Mary and Martha and his disciples for their resistance to believing in him, for their lack of faith. It wouldn't be the first time, or the last.

Finally, Jesus comes to the tomb and asks for the stone at the entrance to be removed. And Martha, who just made the clearest confession of faith in Jesus, tries to stop him. "Don't open the tomb, there's nothing you can do. He's already decaying. It stinks in there." Her faith has its limits.

What does all of this have to do with us, who are about to make our own profession of faith right after the next hymn? What does it have to do with us as we prepare to enter Holy Week and the Great Three Days recalling Jesus' death and resurrection for us and for our salvation? I think it means a couple of things at least. First, it means that God is not waiting for our faith to be perfect before God will act on our behalf. God does not love us because we love God, or trust God, or behave, or follow all of God's rules. God loves and saves us in spite of our doubts and our failures to live up to the faith we confess. Instead, God acts for us in Jesus, in his death and resurrection, and in his ongoing connection to us in word and sacrament, so that we may come to believe and trust more fully and more deeply, and so that our lives might be transformed. Second, it means that forgiveness is key to the transformation of our lives. It is what resurrection life is all about. If you're not convinced that Jesus could be hinting at forgiveness in the unwrapping of Lazarus, that's okay. Have a look, though, at what Jesus says to the disciples at the end of the Gospel, after he is raised from the dead. He sends them to continue his work, and then breathes the Holy Spirit on them, saying this: "if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven." That's the only detail he gives about the work they are to do. And what is the second ending of John about, chapter 21? It's the story of Jesus forgiving Peter, and the charge to feed his sheep.

As our world seems to be falling apart all around us in the alarming events that continue to pile up one after another, it is understandable that we who embrace the Christian faith might feel like Mary and Martha did when their world was falling apart. We believe, but our faith has its limits. And we're not sure that it has anything to do with the rotting corpse of our present reality. We might even be angry at God for not intervening. And Jesus might still be irked at our slowness to trust him. But God will not give up on us, just as Jesus did not give up on them. God is still at work in the world that God so loves in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. God will not allow our past to hold us captive, and is determined that we be unbound and set free.

May we cling to that promise in the coming days and throughout our life. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.