“God will unbind”

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John 11:1-45

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***Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. 3So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” 4But when Jesus heard it, he said, “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.” 5Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, 6after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.***

***7Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” 8The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” 9Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble because they see the light of this world. 10But those who walk at night stumble because the light is not in them.” 11After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” 12The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” 13Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. 14Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. 15For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” 16Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”***

***17When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 18Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, 19and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. 20When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. 21Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” 23Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” 24Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” 25Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” 27She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”***

***28When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” 29And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. 30Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 31The Jews who were with her in the house consoling her saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there.******32When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” 33When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” 35Jesus began to weep. 36So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” 37But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”***

***38Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” 40Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” 41So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” 43When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” 44The 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.”***

***45Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did believed in him.***

It’s an odd thing when one is learning to play the flute, to blow across the top of the hole in the instrument instead of into the hole in the instrument. It’s a natural thing to do, to hold the flute and try to blow into the hole – one finds themselves moving their head to the hole, and they end up lowering their head and chin to reach it. They may lift their heads a little and make some kind of a sound, and then, feeling ever so thankful, they never move their heads again. It seems counter-intuitive to actually feel like you’re moving the hole away from your face in order to improve the sound. I’m constantly saying lift your chin, lift your chin. What happens when the kids hear lift your chin is they tilt their whole head up as if to say, “I’ll lift my chin alright!” and up goes their chin into the best stuck-up look they can give me. I find that it works better to say “Don’t lower your chin,” instead of “Lift your chin.” “Don’t lower” is better than “lift.” Telling them what *not to* do in this case is actually more helpful than telling them what *to* do in order to more accurately and completely convey the message. Don’t do what’s natural, do do this other thing. Un-lower your chin.

“Unbow your head, sister.” is one of the most powerful lines from a movie that I have ever heard.1 From the 2018 movie, “If Beale Street Could Talk,” Tish’s older sister responds to Tish’s announcement to the family that she is pregnant by Fonny, a young man who has since been imprisoned accused of rape. Tish and Fonny have been in love for a long time and her family knows this. The white policemen in the neighborhood have a beef with Fonny, so when a young woman is raped they accuse Fonny who is innocent, yet is jailed. So when Tish goes to her supportive family, and tells them of her pregnancy, the fact that she is a young unwed mother-to be might carry some shame. But her sister and her family have her back, and Tish’s sister looks her in the eye and says, “Unbow your head, sister.” Do not do the natural thing – the natural thing in her context being to stay small, stay under the weight of the role where her neighborhood and the whites would have her remain. Do not do all that. Unbow your head. Sister.

Forty-five lines of scripture, some good theater here, and I land on nearly the last line, line 44 as today’s focus. When Lazarus came out of the tomb still wrapped in cloth, Jesus said to them, “Unbind him and let him go.” The natural thing was that Lazarus was dead and wrapped in cloth. Jesus message was to not do the natural thing – not see the finality of the death of Lazarus, the man bound to death – but rather to unbind him. What might it be like not only to be set free, but to be completely unbound?

Next week is Palm/Passion Sunday where we will rehearse once again Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem and follow with holy week and Easter Sunday. Today then marks the last and most dramatic of Jesus’ signs and miracles that the gospel of John has born witness to for this year’s season of Lent. No longer only speaking to a Pharisee who came to see Jesus by night; no longer only speaking to a woman, in a town where he didn’t belong; no longer only bringing sight to a man born blind; now in today’s scripture Jesus has broken the final barrier to life eternal, he has broken the bounds of death!

Woah, woah! Hold on a second there, this isn’t Easter yet. No, but it is the final chance the lectionary gives us to hear and see Jesus get his message across to his disciples before the events of his final days are set in motion. So far during lent, first Jesus has told us that he is the one of whom the disciples have heard tell about. Then we got to hear four different examples of the kinds of world that will come when the grace of the Lord is made manifest through him. 2) He will catch the eye and ear of even the one’s in the know, the Pharisees. 3) He will go of his own initiative to places where he is unwelcome like Sychar in Samaria and speak to those who others think he should avoid like a woman getting water from a well in the heat of the day. 4) He will even go as far as changing the life of a man born blind from birth left to beg, so that the man can see and continue to live an eternal life while on earth under the grace of God. And lastly, 5) Lazarus will live again even though he has died.

So why isn’t this an Easter sermon? Because all of these texts thus far in lent have been events that have happened to other people, through the power of God in Jesus. What we will begin to rehearse and re-witness next Sunday is when that power of God takes place in the life of Jesus himself, beginning with his entry into Jerusalem.

Until then, we are given this text, leading right up to the most extreme event of all of Jesus’ signs, sure to set off even the most forgiving of Pharisees. This is the last straw. Not only has Jesus returned life to someone dead (4 days dead, not just in a coma), but Jesus also calls for the man to be unbound. Just to confirm that Lazarus is in no way hindered by death, indeed in the next chapter, John 12 we read, “Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. **2**There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him.” Lazarus reclining and eating to show that his physical body still existed and needed nourishment. Completely unbound.

It should not be lost in the celebration of new life, that most of this text is filled with the reality of grief within a family, within a community, among friends. There’s even the visceral comment about the stench after four days in the tomb. There is the frustration of the people who thought Jesus had arrived too late. Listen to all the weeping. “When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to weep.” Still greatly disturbed, Jesus came to the tomb.

Can you imagine? Was Jesus wrong when he said Lazarus was merely sleeping? When he said that it wasn’t the kind of illness that lead to death? Did Jesus delay too long in coming to see Lazarus? We can’t be so ready to see Jesus as always right and all powerful to miss the fact that there is much confusion that comes with grief. Everyone in the text who has a question, really has a point. Thomas, so upset that he wanted to go and die with Lazarus. Both Mary and Martha separately questioned Jesus, “If you had been here earlier he would not have died.” Jesus did just return sight to a blind man, why couldn’t he have healed Lazarus before death also? If it was my brother, I would have been really upset with Jesus, who seemed to delay and worry the bleep out of me just to make a point!

The weeping, the stench, the doubt, the confusion, the frustration in this text matches the rest of the gospel of John as representing the most incarnational, the most down to earth human Jesus of all of the gospels. At the same time, the level of wonder and signs and miracles and oneness with God also makes this gospel the one depicting the glory of Christ most fully. Even this raising of Lazarus does not appear in any other gospel and is placed right before the events leading to Jesus’ death specifically point to the coming glory of Christ.

According to the calendar it is not yet Easter Sunday. But according to the gospel, the possibility of the indescribable newness of resurrection and new life is already happening. We need new life so that we can end wars, we can end the drive for power that takes advantage of our fears and drive us to violence. God doesn’t back down. God is not that small. Rhetoric, attacks, lies and threats are nothing to God. When Lazarus was raised, Jesus told those around him to unbind him and let him go. It’s up to the community to help restore what is resurrected to new life. It is up to the community to participate in resurrection.

Last week we talked about the man once blind who even though healed would still need more support to succeed in his new life as a sighted man. That continued support is what I think of when I think of Lazarus who although resurrected would still need to be unbound. When Tish, the young pregnant woman was told to “Unbow your head, sister” that was her family unbinding her from the shame that others would put upon her. That was her family unbinding her from any expectations and letting her go on to live her life with all of their support behind her.

In our ever more complicated world, more and more we need stories of resurrection. And beyond resurrection together we need to unbind ourselves.

Let us pray…

1<https://theschleicherspin.com/2018/12/31/unbow-your-head-in-if-beale-street-could-talk/>

Veronica Miles, Feasting on the Word Series, Year A, Vol. 2, pp.140-145.