Sunday, April 1, 1990
LAZARUS, COME OUT!
John 11:17-44

Do you remember your first experience with death? Maybe it was a grandmother who died when you were ten years old, or a favorite uncle or aunt who died when you were a teenager. Perhaps it was a brother or sister, one of your parents, or your spouse. We've all been there, or we'll be there someday, where Mary and Martha are in this story — where someone who is very close to and loved by us has become ill and died. The grief can be intense, especially so if it's a young person who died before their time.

I have officiated at many, many funerals, and each one is different. When a person dies at age 96, after having lived a long and vigorous life and is ready to die because she knows her life in this world is over, then it's a different kind of sadness that we feel than what we experience when someone dies in the middle of life or when someone who is very young dies before having a chance to do much more than begin their life in this world.

From what we know, Lazarus was a young man when he suddenly became ill and died. Jesus had been notified by Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, that his close friend was seriously ill and near death. The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. They were some of his dearest friends. He had been a guest in their home in the little village of Bethany more than once.

Yet when Jesus got the message that his beloved friend was ill, he didn't seem to be in any hurry to get to his bedside. The Bible says Jesus waited two days before going to the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. One commentator calls this: "the strange tardiness of Jesus." We frankly do not know for sure why Jesus delayed going to the bedside of his friend. We can only guess. Perhaps he assumed the illness was not that serious, so there was no hurry. Or maybe he had other business he considered more pressing. Or could it be Jesus sensed that by the time the message of Lazarus' illness reached him, Lazarus was already dead, so there was no reason to hurry? In fact, we are told later in the Gospel story that when Jesus arrived at Lazarus' home, Lazarus had already been dead for four days. Otherwise, it does seem out of character for Jesus. All through the Gospels, one is struck by his eagerness to help.

Though we can't be absolutely certain of the reason for Jesus' delay, we know the experience. Haven't there been times when you've prayed and prayed for God's help, and it seemed as if God was far away? Or perhaps you've had someone you love die of a dreadful disease, and then not long after, a cure for that kind of disease is discovered, and you've wondered why it seems as if God comes to the aid of others but not to me when needed? Maybe the story is reminding us that God does not always fit into our human timetables. "God's ways are not our ways," said the prophet Isaiah.

An individual experienced in the life of the spirit wrote:

"We must wait for God, long meekly in the wind and wet, in the thunder and lightning, in the cold and the dark. Wait, and God will come. God never comes to those that do not wait. God does not go their road. When God comes, go along, but go slowly, fall a little behind; when God quickens the pace, be sure of it before you quicken yours. But when God slackens, slacken at once: and do not be slow only, but silent, very silent, for God is God."

Although we do not know exactly why Jesus delayed in going to Lazarus, we do know that when Jesus did decide to make the trip, his disciples did not want him to go. They thought such a trip was foolhardy. They were afraid of what could happen along the way. Opposition to his ministry from the religious authorities had been growing. The records make it clear that to return to Judea was courting practically certain death. It would be a perilous journey, so dangerous that the disciple named Thomas, when he knew that Jesus was going to make the trip no matter what, said in resignation, “Then let us go and die with Lazarus.”

During this last week, I’ve read this story of Jesus and his close friends, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, over and over again. Here’s what I think happened.

I believe Jesus knew that by the time he got the message of his friend’s serious illness, Lazarus had already died, so as I said earlier, there was no need to hurry there. So Jesus took time to pray in order to better discern God’s will. Should he make the trip and jeopardize his life on the way? Did God have other things for him yet to do?

As a result of his prayers, he came to the conclusion that it was God’s will that he go to Lazarus, and then he continued in the two-day prayer session to pray for Lazarus. We are told in the story that when Jesus came to the tomb, he did not pray that God would raise Lazarus from the grave. Rather, Jesus gave thanks that God had already heard him and granted his request. When? During those two days of waiting, when far from forgetting his friends at Bethany, or ignoring their sorrow, he was wrestling in prayer on their behalf. That’s why also when Martha said to Jesus upon his arrival, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,” Jesus said, “Your brother will rise again.” She misunderstood him and thought Jesus was talking about resurrection far into the future. It was then that Jesus spoke those memorable words that are so comforting for all of us, “I am the resurrection and the life; those who believe in me, though they die, yet shall they live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.”

We in the church cling to these words like few other sayings of Jesus. The scene of Jesus with two grieving sisters, weeping at the grave of their brother, has offered comfort and hope unmatched by any other resource.

But there’s still more to this story than at first meets the eye. The Gospel of John’s account of the raising of Lazarus is one of several “sign” stories. A “sign” story consists of a miraculous act of Jesus, usually surrounded or followed by a theological discussion of its meaning.

Some of the other “sign” stories in the Gospel of John are the story of Jesus turning water into wine, healing a cripple at the pool, feeding the crowds, giving sight to a man born blind (we talked about that story last week), and the one we are considering today — the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

At least two unique features are a part of sign stories. First, Jesus acts according to his own time and not according to external pressures. We have already noted how Jesus delayed two days after getting the message that Lazarus was seriously ill. Second, to say this is a sign story is to say that its primary function is revelation. Some larger truth about the meaning of God’s glory and presence in the world is made known through the action.

For stories to function in this way, they must be seen to operate on two levels. On one level, Jesus turns water into wine, heals a cripple, gives sight to a blind man, or in the case of Lazarus, raises the dead. But on another level, he reveals a truth about life eternal, which

begins here and now and which God makes available in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is prefaced by a statement of its purpose: it is not only for the glory of God but that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it.

Thus, what is really going on here is not only a family crisis in Bethany but the crisis of the world; not only for the raising of a dead man but the giving of life to the world. On one level, the story is about the death and resurrection of Lazarus, but on another, it is about the coming death and resurrection of Jesus.

Martha and Mary want their brother back, to be sure, but Jesus is also acting to give life to the world. Jesus declares that truth to Martha at the center of the story: “I am the resurrection and the life.”

Now we can better understand what was going on in the mind and spirit of Jesus. We are told that he was “deeply moved in spirit and troubled.” Later on, we are told again that Jesus was “deeply moved.” We are also told that “Jesus wept.” The crowd, upon seeing Jesus weeping, said, “See how he loved him.” But in this Gospel, the people in the crowds never completely understand what is going on. Jesus wept not only for Lazarus but for himself and for the whole world.

Jesus is experiencing something like what he later experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane, for he knows that calling Lazarus out of the tomb means that he must enter it.

The story that follows this one in the Gospel of John underscores this. We are told that the belief in Jesus generated by his raising Lazarus prompts the religious authorities to plot Jesus’ death.

But for Jesus, there is no other way because only in this act can he be the resurrection and life for the world. Thus, as readers, we can see in and through the Lazarus story, the Jesus story.

Now, this does not mean that Martha, Mary, and Lazarus are simply props for a spiritual story. Like the man born blind and the cripple, they are real people trapped in grief and death, and Jesus brings comfort and life. Jesus was a real human being ministering among the suffering.

But the gospel story wants us to understand that God’s blessing did not come only to certain people who happened to be in that place at that time.

There was not simply one place in history where cripples were healed, the blind could see, and the dead were raised. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life — anyone who believes...” That includes all of us.

And there is yet another level to this story and why the church remembered it and passed it on to us. It is not only a “sign” story but a teaching story.

When Jesus arrived at the cave where Lazarus had been buried, he began giving commands, three in all. First, “Take away the stone.” Then Jesus prayed a prayer of thanksgiving, after which he called out with a loud voice the second command, “Lazarus, come out.” And indeed Lazarus came out with his hands and feet and face still wrapped in the burial clothes. Then Jesus gave the third command, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

So the teaching in this story, the good news, is about the power of God which is able to free us from the tombs and slaveries in which we find ourselves. Hasn't it been your experience to know people who are not physically dead but who are in tombs of their own making? Think about the people who need to be unbound and let go, ... freed up, as we like to say.

The raising of Lazarus tells us that God is forever calling us out of our tombs. God calls us to be free. "Lazarus, come out!" As a church, God calls us to "unbind people and let them go."

Thus, whatever your tomb is, you are being called by Jesus to come out. Maybe you are in the tomb of an emotional deadlock with some other person where you demand that the other change first or where you refuse to seek outside help. Or perhaps you are in the tomb of the relentless drive to do things, to always be busy and in a hurry, and therefore always have an excuse for not responding humanly to the people around you. Or you could be in the tomb of an addiction, not only to alcohol or drugs but the addiction of making money, or attaining status, or the addiction of consuming, ... or the tomb of the lust for power. Maybe you are bound up with the fear of the present or the future, and so you continue to live in the tomb of the past, and you need therefore to be called out of your tomb and to be unbound and let go.

I believe through this story of Jesus calling Lazarus out of his tomb, God is calling each one of us to come out of our tomb, to be unbound, and to be set free. Amen.