Book 31

Sunday March 24, 1996

JOURNEY TO DEATH AND LIFE John 11:1-45

Do you remember your first experience with death? Maybe as a young child you had a pet dog or cat or parakeet or hamster that died. Or perhaps it was your grandmother who died when you were eight years old? Or a favorite aunt or uncle died when you were a teenager? It could-'ve been a brother or sister or parent.

We've all been there, or will be there someday, where Mary and Martha are in this story from the Gospel of John, where someone who is very close and loved by us has become ill and died, or died suddenly in an accident. The grief can be intense, especially so if it's a young person

who died.

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 that her life in this world is over, then it's a different kind of journey to death in contrast to somone who dies very young or in the middle of life.

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 their brother who was a close friend of Jesus was seriously ill and near death.

Yet when Jesus received the message, he didn't seem to be in any hurry to make the trip to visit

his friend Lazarus. Then when Jesus did decide to go, it was too late, Lazarus had already died, in fact when he got there he had already been buried, having been dead for four days.

Whenever I read this story, I'm always puzzled. Why did Jesus wait so long before going to Bethany? We can only speculate. Maybe by the time he got the message about Lazarus being ill, he was already dead. Instant communication systems such as we have were not available.

Whatever the reason, you've had the experience of Mary and Martha. Haven't there been times when you've prayed and prayed for God's help and there seems to be a long delay before any help comes and then it's too late? I know I've felt at times what Mary and Martha experienced. I've

thought, "If you care so much about me God, where were you when I needed you? How come it took you so long?"

Or maybe you've had a loved one die or know of someone who has been permanently damaged because of an incurable disease, then three years later a cure for that kind of illness is discovered and you've wondered why it took so long?

It could be that one reason the early church remembered this story is that it reminded them that the workings of God do not always fit into our human timetables. It is true that sometimes God's delays seem unreasonably long.

During this past week, I've read this story of Jesus and his close friends, Lazarus, Mary and

Martha, over and over again. Here's what I think happened and why the early church remembered this story.

First of all, I believe that Jesus knew that by the time he got the message of his friend's serious illness, Lazarus had already died, so there was no reason for Jesus to hurry to get there. Rather he took time to pray in order to better discern God's will. Should he make the trip and jeopardize his life on the way? Strong opposition to his ministry had been growing. Did God have other things for him yet to do?

As a result of his praying, 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, Mary and Martha.

We are told in the story that when he came to the tomb, he did not pray that God would raise Lazarus from the grave. Instead 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 in Bethany, or ignoring their sorrow, he was engaged in prayer on their behalf.

So when Martha said to Jesus upon his arrival, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," Jesus answered, "Your brother will rise again." She misunderstood him and thought he was talking about a life after death far into the future. It was then that Jesus spoke those memorable words that are so comforting to 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. Furthermore, the scene of Jesus with two grieving sisters, weeping with them at the tomb of Lazarus has offered comfort and hope unmatched by any other resource.

But there's still more to this story and why the early church remembered it. The account of the raising of Lazarus is one of several "sign" stories in the gospels. A "sign" story consists of a miraculous act of Jesus 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 and giving sight to a man born blind. We talked about that story last week. The story of Lazarus is also one of these "sign" stories.

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 from others. We have already noted how Jesus delayed two days after getting the message that Lazarus was seriously ill. Second, a "sign" story is rememberd and told because it carries some larger truth about the meaning of God's glory and presence in the world which is made known through the action that takes place in the story.

For stories to function in this way, they must be seen to operate on two levels. On one level,

Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. But on another level, the action reveals a truth about life eternal which begins here and now and which God makes available through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Thus what is really going on here is not only a family crisis in Bethany but in a larger frame it is a message about what God is doing for all of creation. In the same way that Jesus gives life to Lazarus, God is giving 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.

Mary and Martha want their brother back and in their having him back even though he will die again, Jesus is letting everyone know that

through him God is giving 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 he was "deeply moved." We are also told that "Jesus wept." The crowd upon seeing Jesus weeping, said, "See how he loved him." Jesus was weeping not only for Lazarus, but for himself and for the whole world.

Jesus is experiencing something like what he 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. We can therefore see in and through the Lazarus story, the Jesus story.

This does not mean that Lazarus, Mary and Martha are simply props for a spiritual story. They are real people caught in grief and death and Jesus brings comfort and life. Jesus was a real human being ministering among the suffering.

There is one more level to this story. It is not only a "sign" story but also a teaching story.

When Jesus arrived at the cave where Lazarus was buried, he gave three distinct commands.

The first command was to those who were with him, "Take away the stone." The second command was to Lazarus inside the cave, "Lazarus, come out." The third command was again to those who were there with Jesus. "Unbind him and let him go."

All three commands were remembered because they were commands for the early church as metaphors and function in the same way for us today.

We all live in caves or tombs of one sort or another which need the stone rolled away so we can be free. A man named Gus had a terrible childhood--one he'd buried the day he graduated from high school and left home for good never to look back.

After putting himself through college, he married a gentle woman who loved him as no one in his life ever had. Jeanette was a Christian and Gus had gone to church with her because he could see how much it meant to her. In one church service he felt himself so moved that he began to cry. From then on he was like a man on fire. He began to study the Bible. He did his best to follow the teachings of Jesus.

But despite serious prayer and effort on his part, Gus had a terrible temper that flared up without warning. One day in his anger, he began to hit his four year old daughter for not taking a nap. Later that evening when he saw the bruises on her little body, he broke down. He had abused his child, something he promised he would never do. His wife realized a few months later that Gus

was in a tomb of depression that threatened to swallow him. He agreed to see a therapist that their minister recommended. For the next several years, Gus went to therapy and with the help of the therapist began to pry open the stone from the tomb of the past that he'd buried himself in because he was too scared to uncover it...the years of physical abuse he'd endured as a child that was the source of his rage.

Little by little, Gus and his therapist worked to remove the stone so that his past hurts could be exposed to the healing light of Christ. As a result he found new life and became a different person. It was a journey from death to life.

There are so many stones that need to be rolled away from the caves in our lives so that light and

fresh air can enter and the same is true on a societal level. We are called as individuals and as a church to remove these stones so that the destructiveness of death which permeates our lives can be open to God's resurrection light.

Jesus' second command was: "Lazarus, come forth." This story tells us that God is forever calling us out of our tombs. God calls us to be free and in addition to the help of others who roll away the stone, it also takes initiative on our part as well. There are so many individuals whose true self is buried somewhere and needs to be called forth.

So whatever your tomb is, you are being called by Jesus to come out. Maybe you are locked in the tomb of an emotional deadlock with some

other person where you demand that the other person 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 in a caring and sensitive way 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 for its own sake, or the addiction of consuming, or the tomb of the lust for power.

Not only are individuals in tombs from which they need to be called out, there are also institutions

and church congregations that are buried and are the same as dead.

Whatever your tomb is, you are being called by God to come forth.

The third command is: "Unbind him and let him go." In the same way that we need help to roll away the stone from the opening of whatever cave or tomb we might find ourselves in, once we have come forth, we also need the help of others to unbind us and let us go.

You could be bound up by a fear of change, or by a fear of the future. You could also be bound up by past memories or resentments. Part of the job of the church is to unbind people and let them go. Your journey to death can be turned into a journey to life. Amen.