Sunday, March 21, 1999
OPENING TOMBS
John 11:1-7,17-27,38-44

Most of you who are hearing this sermon have had some kind of experience with death. Perhaps a grandparent you loved died, or maybe one or both of your parents, a sister, or brother. Parents who have had a child die know especially the pain of grief. If you have been married and your beloved spouse has died, you also know the agony of loss. Those who have had a pet die that has been part of your household also understand the ache of loss.

We've all been there, or will be there someday, where Mary and Martha are in this story about the death of their brother Lazarus. The grief can be intense, especially so if it's a young person who has died or someone who has died suddenly in an accident.

I have officiated at 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 and a different kind of grief in contrast to someone 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. His sisters, Mary and Martha, sent a message to Jesus that their brother was very sick. All three of them — Mary, Martha, and Lazarus — were close friends of Jesus, so they expected him to come to their home as quickly as possible.

Surprisingly, when Jesus received the message, he didn't appear to be in any hurry to make the trip to visit his friend Lazarus. Then, when he did decide to go, it was too late. Lazarus had already died. In fact, when he arrived, Lazarus 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, Lazarus was already dead. Cell phones and other forms of almost instant communication were not available.

Whatever the reason, you've had the experience of Mary and Martha. There've been times when you've told someone about an emergency, and there's been a delay before any help comes, and then it's too late. Or you've prayed to God for help, and nothing seemed to happen. I know I've felt 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 so long?"

I believe one reason the early followers of Jesus remembered this story is that it reminded them that the workings of God do not always fit into our human timetables. There are times when God's delays seem unreasonably long.

During this past week, I've read this story of Jesus and his friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus again and again. Here's what I think happened and why the story was remembered.

First of all, I believe that by the time Jesus got the message of his friend's critical illness, Lazarus had already died, and Jesus knew this, so there was no reason for him to hurry to get there.

Rather, he took time to pray in order to better discern God's will. He never acted out of panic. 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 prayers, he came to the conclusion that it was God's will that he go to the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, and then he continued in his two-day prayer session to pray for all three of them. We can pray for others without being at their side. The power of prayer is not limited by geographic distance.

We are told in the story that when he came to the tomb, he did not pray to God to raise Lazarus from the dead. Instead, he gave thanks that God had already heard him and granted his request. When? During those two days of waiting, 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 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."

These are some of the most comforting words in the Bible. In addition, the scene of Jesus with the two grieving sisters, weeping with them at the tomb of Lazarus, has offered countless people comfort and hope.

But there's more to this story and why the early church remembered it. Biblical scholars tell us that the account of the raising of Lazarus is one of several "sign" stories in the gospels. A "sign" story is one in which a miraculous act of Jesus is surrounded or followed by a theological discussion of its meaning.

Some of the other "sign" stories in the New Testament are the story of Jesus turning the water into wine, healing a cripple at the pool, feeding the crowds, and giving sight to a man born blind. That story was the basis of last week's sermon. This story of Lazarus is one of the "sign" stories.

"Sign" stories have two unique features. First, Jesus acts according to his own timetable and not according to external pressures from others. We have already noted how Jesus delayed two days after getting the message that Lazarus was critically ill.

Second, a "sign" story is remembered 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 operate in this way, they are perceived as functioning on two levels. On one level, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. And on another level, the action reveals a truth about life eternal which begins here and now and which is possible because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Thus, what is going on here is not only a family crisis in Bethany but, in a larger frame of reference, it is a message about what God is doing in 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, and on another level, it is about the coming death and resurrection of Jesus and how this gives life and hope to all of us.

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. He declares that truth to them when he says, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

There is one more level to this story. It is not only a “sign” story, it is also a teaching story.

When Jesus arrived at the tomb where Lazarus was buried, he gave three distinct commands, and this is where the teaching comes in.

The first command was to those who were with him, “Take away the stone.” The second command was to Lazarus inside the tomb, “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 guides for the early church and for us.

We all live in tombs of one sort or another which need to be opened. This past week I made a short list of some of the tombs in which we live.

Some live in the tomb of loneliness. To get out of this tomb, we need the help of others, and we need to take some action on our own. Many times, someone else has to take away the stone that is blocking the entrance to the tomb. Once that is done, it’s up to us to follow the second command and come out. Once we are out, then the help of others is still needed to unbind us and let us go.

The same is true for the tomb of grief. When someone you deeply love dies, you can find yourself locked in the tomb of grief. Or you can be in the tomb of grief because of the loss of a job, or a divorce, or some other loss. Others may be needed to roll away the stone, but then you need to take some initiative in coming out of the tomb, and again, others are needed to unbind you and let you go.

For example, beginning in April, our church will offer a “Grief Recovery Workshop.” It’s our way of removing the stone from your tomb of grief. But you have to take the next step and sign up and attend. Then through your participation in the workshop, the unbinding and letting go will take place.

I know people who are locked in the tomb of fear, and still others who are in the tomb of illness, or the tomb of no hope, or the tomb of bad memories, or the tomb of hate or unforgiveness.

Our congregation is now in the process of beginning the “Stephen Ministry,” which is a very powerful way of removing the stones that lock people in tombs. The Stephen Ministry is a way of training a number of the members of our congregation to be caregivers in a very intentional way. It’s a way of multiplying the ministry of caring in a congregation like ours.

The Stephen Ministry promotes the concept that everyone in the congregation has a vital role to play in its caring ministry. In the language of this story of Lazarus, it emphasizes the idea

that everyone can roll away stones from the tombs in which people find themselves and that everyone can participate in unbinding and freeing people from the things that hold them back from living their lives fully and joyfully. You will be getting a wealth of information about the Stephen Ministry in the coming weeks and months.

There are so many stones that need to be rolled away from the tombs in our lives so that light and fresh air can enter.

Jesus' second command was "Lazarus, come out." God is forever calling us out of our tombs. Others may remove the stone that blocks the opening, but each one of us has a very important part to play. In another place, Jesus said, "I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears me and opens the door, I will come in." It's the same principle at work.

Last week, in the story of the healing of the man born blind, Jesus performed the first part of the healing and then said to the man, "Go and wash in the pool of Siloam." In another healing, Jesus said to the man, "Rise, take up your sleeping bag, and walk." You have to participate in the healing. That's also true today. Physicians, nurses, and hospitals can only do part of the job. As a patient, it is necessary for you to do your part in the healing process.

So whatever tomb you are in, even though others may roll away the stone from the opening, you have to get up and walk through it. 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.

Maybe you are in the tomb of unemployment. Others may roll away the stone, but you have to take some initiative also.

There are so many tombs that need to be opened in people's lives. 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.

The third command of Jesus was, "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, once we have come out, we also need the help of others in unbinding us and letting us go. The Stephen Ministry will help do that too.

You could be bound up by a fear of change, or a fear of the future, or the fear of death. A large part of the work of the church is to be opening tombs, calling people to come out, and then unbinding them so they can continue on their way. Amen.