Sunday, March 13, 2005
DEATH AND LIFE
John 11:1-7,17-27,38-44

Here's how one woman described her "death" experience: "I didn't want to come back. My consciousness hovered somewhere above the body lying on the gurney. It was all over, I thought. The last sensation I remembered had been incomprehensible pain, then a tunnel, and a grinding noise as described in other 'death experiences.' But unlike other people who have had similar traumas, I saw no lights, no angels, no dead relatives, no friendly saints; rather, I found myself very much awake in a weightless, imageless, gray hyper-reality. I experienced a blessed clarity, freedom, and relief, and a stunning sense of the illusory nature of the life I'd left behind."

"Then suddenly, I was snapped back. There seemed to be some alternative plan for my life. Someone was shaking my body and calling me by name. No! No! Unprepared and inept, I slipped, as if falling on ice, into that lesser 'reality' in a helpless panic of anguish and anger. Suddenly, I was back into the confines of that little life of mine. Now I carried a memory of the futility of this 'fake' life. It was as if I hadn't had time to drink the magic 'forgetting potion' that makes you immune to truth. I came to consciousness disappointed, frustrated, unspeakably sad — and in excruciating pain."

This woman's story could help you begin to understand the story of Lazarus coming back from the dead as it is told in the gospel of John. Was he reluctant to return to this life as was this woman? How far had he traveled into the next life? When he heard Jesus shout to him, "Lazarus, come out," could he have refused to respond?

Most of you hearing this sermon have had some kind of connection with death, although it may not have been a personal "death" event as described earlier by the woman or like that of Lazarus. Maybe a grandparent you loved died, or one or both of your parents, or a sister or brother. Parents who have had a child die know especially the pain of loss and grief. If you have been married and your beloved spouse died, you know the agony of death. Or if you have had a pet die that had been part of your family for many years, you know the pain of loss.

We've all been there or will be there one day, where Mary and Martha are in this story about the death of Lazarus, their brother. I have officiated at many funerals and each one is different. My stepmother died about 8 weeks ago at age 103, after having lived a long and vigorous life. She was ready to die. She would not have wanted Jesus to call her back from death. A death at that age is a different kind of journey than that of a person who dies much younger or in the middle of life.

From what we know, Lazarus was a relatively young man when he suddenly became ill and died. Jesus was informed that their brother was very sick. All three of them — Mary, Martha, and Lazarus — were close friends of Jesus, and so they expected him to come to their home as quickly as possible.

However, according to the story, when Jesus received their message, he didn't appear to be in any hurry to make the trip to visit Lazarus. When he did decide to go, it was too late. Lazarus had died, and by the time Jesus arrived, he had been placed in a cave-like tomb.

Whenever I read this story, I'm always puzzled. Why did Jesus wait so long before making the trip? One can only speculate. Maybe by the time he got the message, Lazarus had already died. 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 have been times when you've told someone about an emergency, and there had been a delay before help comes, and then it's too late. Or you've prayed to God for help and nothing seemed to change.

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 human timetables. There are times when God's delays seem unreasonably long.

I've reflected on this story of Lazarus, Mary, Martha, and Jesus several times. Here's what I believe happened, why the story was remembered, and what it can teach you.

First of all, I am convinced that by the time Jesus got the message of his friend's illness, Lazarus had already died, and Jesus knew this, so there was no reason for him to hurry to get there. So, he took time to pray and try to discern God's will. He never acted in panic. Should he make the trip and jeopardize his own life? Strong opposition to his ministry had been growing. Did God have other things for him to do?

Finally, Jesus came to the conclusion that it was God's will for him to go to the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. 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 his prayers.

So when Martha said to him 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 this life, far into the future. It was then that Jesus spoke those memorable words that are so comforting: "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 and what you can learn from it. Biblical scholars will tell you 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.

Other examples of "sign" stories in the New Testament 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. The 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 pressure from others. You've already noticed how Jesus delayed several days after getting the message that Lazarus was critically ill.

Second, a “sign” story is remembered because it carries some larger truth which is made known through the action in the story. For these stories to operate in this way, they are perceived on two levels. On one level, Jesus calls forth Lazarus from the tomb. On another level, the action reveals a truth about life eternal for all people, which begins here and now. A “sign story” is an action parable.

So what is going on here in this story 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, the story is to remind you that God is giving life to you and to the whole world.

Mary and Martha wanted 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 when he says, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

There is one more level to this 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 with him: “Unbind him and let him go.” These three commands were guidelines for the early church and for you and me.

The story is saying that all people live in tombs of one sort or another that need to be opened. Some of you live in the tomb of loneliness. To get out of this tomb, you need the help of others, and you need to take some action on your own. There are times when someone else has to take away the stone that is blocking the entrance to your tomb of loneliness. Once that is done, it’s up to you to follow the second command and come out. When you are out, then the help of others is still needed to unbind you and let you go.

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, 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. That’s why this church periodically offers “grief recovery workshops.” There is one beginning next month. It’s our way of rolling away the stone and then calling you out of your tomb of grief and loneliness and unbinding you.

Some of you could be in the tomb of addiction — addiction to alcohol, drugs, gambling, or even work. Twelve-step programs such as AA are ways of rolling away the stone from your tomb and calling you out, and then unbinding you and letting you go.

You could be locked in the tomb of fear, and still others could be locked in the tomb of illness or the tomb of hopelessness, or the tomb of hate or revenge, or bad memories, or the tomb of unforgiveness. People are trapped in so many different tombs. Participating in worship services, discussion groups, and Bible study are all ways of rolling away the stone and calling you out of your tombs.

The ministry that this church carries on is a very powerful way of removing stones from the opening of tombs and calling people out and then unbinding them so they are free.

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

Jesus' second command was "Lazarus, come out." When Lazarus heard Jesus calling him to come out, did he want to shout back, "No, leave me alone"? Some people today don't want to be called out of their tombs. It frequently takes others to remove the stones that block the openings. It can take others to help you, but it also requires some action on your own. It's significant in this story that Jesus did not go into the tomb to touch Lazarus or shake him awake. Lazarus had to take some action on his own.

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 story, Jesus said to the person being healed, "Get up! Walk!" You have to participate in the healing.

That's also true today. Counselors, physicians, nurses, and others can only do part of the job. As a patient, it is necessary for you to do your part in the healing process.

After Lazarus had come out, Jesus said, "Unbind him and let him go." Go where? Home? Could Lazarus live contentedly at home again? You can be sure that his life would never be the same. Once you are called out of your tomb and glimpse and experience the total love of God, your life is changed forever. It can happen to you if you are willing to be called out of your tomb, whatever it is. Amen.