

Experiencing Jesus: Love is Stronger than Death

John 11:1-45

March 9, 2008

It is dangerous for Jesus to go to Bethany, for it is only two miles from Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the home of the religious authorities who are calling for Jesus' death. Nevertheless, when the time is right, Jesus goes to visit Martha and Mary. Martha goes out to meet him on the road before he arrives at the house. It is human nature to express anger in grief. Lament is also a normal aspect of Hebrew spirituality. Both Mary and Martha suggest that if Jesus had arrived earlier, he could have prevented their brother's death. Haven't we asked the same question? God, where were you when I needed you? If you had been here, this tragedy never would have happened.

Martha moves beyond anger and professes her faith in Jesus. "I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus promises, "Your brother will rise again." Martha thinks that he is speaking of the resurrection at the consummation of God's kingdom. Jesus says, "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" Martha responds, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Martha recognizes the presence of God in Jesus. Jesus and God are one. As the resurrection and the life, Jesus shares fully in the power of God. In Jesus we witness God's desire to conquer those deadly forces which threaten to remove people from life with God.

Mary comes out to meet Jesus, kneeling at his feet, weeping. Jesus is greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He weeps in solidarity with the sisters and friends of his beloved friend, Lazarus. Having just made a bold proclamation of his divine nature, here Jesus also expresses his very human nature. We see in this scene how Jesus is truly divine and fully human. At one and the same time Jesus is the God with a heart of compassion for his suffering children and a man experiencing the range of human emotions.

John notes that Lazarus' tomb is a cave, sealed by a stone. It may have been a naturally occurring cave or a cavity hewn out of rock. Along the walls of the cave are carved shelves upon which bodies were laid, one above another. Lazarus' tomb was a repository for several bodies.

In the ancient world caves were special places where sacred and mystery-laden events took place. It is likely that the stable in which Christ was born was in fact a cave. Christian tradition says that Christ taught the Lord's Prayer to the disciples in a cave and that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was buried in a cave. John Sanford suggests that "A return to the cave at death is symbolic of a return to God as the Mother, where life is born and to which life returns in order to be born again."ⁱ

Jesus commands the stone to be rolled away in spite of the concern that Lazarus had been dead four days. According to popular Jewish belief at the time, the soul hovered around the body in the grave for three days after death, hoping to reenter the body. But after the third day, when the soul "sees that the color of its face has changed," the soul leaves the body for good.ⁱⁱ Jesus seizes Lazarus' death as an opportunity to reveal the glory of God.

The story continues with Jesus offering prayer. Two elements are characteristic of Jesus' prayer in John's gospel: he looks upward and he addresses God as Father. Jesus' prayer is one

of thanksgiving: “I thank you for having heard me.” It is not the desperate pleading of someone in agony. Jesus’ ability to express gratitude to God even in the face of death is an indication of his deep and abiding relationship with God. He doesn’t need to make individual prayer requests of God, because he lives in constant communion with God and in the certainty of his relationship with God. Jesus models the confidence in God to which he will soon summon his disciples. In this act of doxology, Jesus directs his eyes upward to point those gathered around the tomb not to himself, but toward God. Jesus does nothing on his own; everything he does is God’s action in and through him. Jesus’ prayerful relationship with God enables the life-giving, resurrection power of God to flow through him.

Jesus calls Lazarus to come out of the tomb, the tight place of confinement. He invites Lazarus to move from the darkness of the cave into the light of the sun. Lazarus responds to Jesus’ voice and comes out, his hands and feet still bound with grave clothes, and his face wrapped in cloth. The raising of Lazarus demonstrates that the power of God’s love is stronger than the power of death. The love of God empowers us to overcome the losses of life.

But the story is not over. It concludes with Jesus’ command to the gathered community, to the sisters and spiritual companions of Lazarus: “Unbind him, and let him go.” They are given the choice to keep him under wraps and dead or to set him free for life anew. His hands and feet are still bound with strips of cloth. They need to be severed so that he can move again. His face is shrouded with cloth; it needs to be removed so that he can see the world afresh.

We aren’t certain how the community responds. We assume that they rushed to embrace Lazarus and to carefully unwrap the cloth that bound him. We trust that they completed the gift of new life which Jesus so powerfully initiated.

This is the mission of the church: to unwrap the grave clothes that keep people from being restored to new life. God through Jesus takes the initiative to offer new life, to invigorate the surge toward faith within. It is the role of the community to assist one another in shedding the baggage that prevents the fullness of life from emerging.

Anna Carter Florence suggests, “John 11 is the prime example of Jesus’ human and divine sides at work, simultaneously, on our behalf. Weeping, yet raising. Coming to us, yet moved by us. Calling us out of our tombs. *And telling us to unbind him, and let him go....* God raises the dead, but we are the ones who have to unbind them. God calls us out of our tombs, but we are the ones who have to let one another go free....*Resurrection is not the last act, in this story. The last act is unbinding, and God gives it to us, to do on behalf of one another.*”ⁱⁱⁱ

Each of us can name someone we know in need of unbinding from the cave of confinement, from the brokenness of loss, from the prison of hopelessness, from the agony of loneliness. Each of us has been there ourselves, in need of a listening ear, a warm embrace, a word of encouragement. We also know of resurrections that have failed because the resurrected one could never undo all those bandages by herself. We know of miraculous recoveries that have relapsed because the community didn’t do its part to let the recovering one “go free” of the old patterns and habits that kept him in bondage.

Joan Chittister reminds us of many who are wrapped in bondage around the world. “Over 90 percent of those killed in war are now, in our century, civilians – and most of those are women and children....Over 1 billion people, 20 percent of the population of the globe, lack access to clean drinking water and 2.6 billion, almost half the people of the world, lack adequate

sanitation....There are 781 illiterate adults in the world.”^{iv} God’s people are crying out to be freed from the wounds of war which ravage lives and destroy souls, freed to live in peace and protection. We have the ability to release people from disease and dehydration that spread illness and death; we have the ability, but do we have the will as a global community to share our wealth so that others might live? We have the intelligence and resources to educate the world, to empower families to grow, countries to develop, and economies to thrive. The choice is ours. Jesus calls, “Unbind them, and let them go. Participate with me in offering the gift of new life.”

Fred Craddock tells of arriving at a church where he was scheduled to hold services Friday evening, Saturday evening, and Sunday morning. When he pulled into the parking lot, a funeral was concluding. People were moving to their automobiles; the hearse was still there. The minister recognized him, and motioned for Fred to come over. He didn’t want to intrude; he was just waiting until it was over. The minister was standing next to the widow and introduced her to Fred. Feeling awkward, Fred said, “This is no time for you to be meeting strangers. I’m sorry, and I’m really sorry about your loss.” Her husband had been killed in a car wreck and left her with four children. He said, “I know this is a very difficult time for you.”

She said, “It is. So I won’t be at the services tonight, but I’ll be there tomorrow night, and I’ll be there Sunday morning.”

Fred replied, “Oh, you don’t need to.”

“Yes, I do.”

Fred said, “Well, what I meant was, I know it’s a very hard time.”

And she said, “I know it’s hard. It’s already hard, but you see, this is my church, and they’re going to see that my children and I are okay.”^v

She was expecting her community of faith to unbind her and help free her for new life. That’s what Jesus commanded them to do: “Unbind her, and let her go. Participate with me in offering the gift of new life. Witness to the fact that love is stronger than death, that love can overcome the losses of life.”

This is our mission, my friends. May God grant us the strength and courage to fulfill the call.

ⁱ John Sanford, From *Mystical Christianity: A Psychological Commentary on the Gospel of John* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), pp. 224-227. Quoted in *The Bible Workbench* 15:2, March 9, 2008, p. 96.

ⁱⁱ Gail R. O’Day, *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 687.

ⁱⁱⁱ Anna Carter Florence, *Lectionary Homiletics* Vol. XIX, No. 2, p. 51.

^{iv} Joan Chittister, “From Where I Stand,” *National Catholic Reporter*, March 6, 2008, www.ncrcafe.org.

^v Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001), p. 123.

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