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Bush Hill Presbyterian Church  
Alexandria, VA 22310  
April 10, 2011  
Fifth Sunday in Lent

Ezekiel 37:1–14  
John 11:1–45

## **JESUS RESURRECTS – WE UNBIND**

The Gospel of John—it is jam-packed with words which move us close to the Gospel. In fact, John’s use of language pulls us into the stories of Jesus’ life—of his death and resurrection. There are time and again instances where the disciples have a hint of what is to come, what is to happen during Passover in Jerusalem. They must have looked back over their experiences and interrupted one another saying, “Do you remember when we were in Bethany and we didn’t understand ...?”

It seems very clear that Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead and it also seems very clear it’s just as important to keep that community engaged in the story. How does it end? It ends with Jesus delegating responsibility to the crowd to unbind Lazarus from his grave clothes, to take away the strips of cloth that are causing him to stumble and block his vision. Unbind him. Set him free. Yes, God resurrects, but God works through us to set free those who are trapped by past failures, by mistakes and misjudgments. God brings about miraculous recoveries. God is much more willing to help us out of our desperate times than we are to be with one another and allow the miracle to take form. We are expected to be partners, to work in breaking old patterns, old habits, old ways of treating one another that will never allow us to be free.

I don’t know if you were drawn in by this story of Lazarus, or if you kept this story like so many testament passages at arm’s length—a safe distance, a rational theology away from the essence of what you believe. I don’t know if this story really makes a difference for you when you think about those who have gone before us. I do know the dynamics are unmistakable. For those gatherers in Bethany that day there can be no doubt this indeed is God’s son.

But Jesus intended that. He was very purposeful. I love the way that the King James phrases this passage. It says Jesus “tarried” two more days. He tarried. That sounds much more purposeful than saying he just stayed two more days where he was, as though he wasn’t aware of what was going on. No. When I hear he tarried, I get this image of yes, he was counting the moments till he could go to Bethany, but he had to allow God’s plan to develop—to unfold.

You notice that something very unique happens during that two-day wait. Yes, Lazarus has died but also the Jewish understanding of how body and spirit are intertwined also developed. Jews were taught that for the first three days of death the spirit of the body stayed close, but after three days that spirit was gone. So Jesus waited till the fourth day. He tarried long enough so that the gift of faith could be even more dynamic and

life-changing, not just for Lazarus, but for everyone who had gathered to help Mary and Martha.

Have you ever felt like you were waiting on God? Have you ever prayed, “God why is this taking so long?” Have you ever thought: “God, why did this have to happen? When are you going to do something?” This was the prayer of Mary and Martha when they said, “Lord, if you had been here, our brother wouldn’t have died.”

I believe Jesus wept with these two sisters because of their lament and sadness, but he also wept with them because they lacked confidence in what he had promised. They lacked understanding. They lacked the faith that he was so willing to give. And I also believe that Jesus weeps with us, in part as a way of identifying with our plight in life, but also because we too are so quick to lose hope.

Remember how Jesus approached Martha and asked her if she believed her brother would rise from the dead? She was ever so careful. Her theology was saved. She said she believed he would rise on the last day. Sounds like Ezekiel, doesn’t it? God says, “Ezekiel, can these bones live?” The prophet gives the safe answer: “You know, Lord, not me. I’m just human.” Right?

So, Jesus tarries. In other words, God’s purposes are greater than our embedded perceptions. Jesus tarries so that Mary and Martha’s belief in him can be genuine. And then he weeps and there is power in his tears, in each drop that falls from his cheeks, because he is totally present in that moment. He is with them there exactly where they are.

I don’t know when the last time you lost faith was. I don’t know if there’s ever been a time when you can say that you doubted God’s care for you. But, if you have, Jesus was weeping with you. I wonder if we even allow that to have an impact on our faith, or do we keep t gospel at a safe distance.

In the 43<sup>rd</sup> verse of our reading Jesus says, “Come out.” It’s a simple command, isn’t it: “Come out.” And yet it carries the creative impact of God speaking in Genesis. Remember Jesus was there also. “Let there be light. Come out.” God speaks and everything changes. God’s word is active despite our pain, despite our tombs, where we have pulled ourselves away and are hiding, seeking security—that safe theology. “Lazarus, come out.” A command for each of us. And just like Lazarus, when we come out of our tombs, when we turn our backs on sin again, what’s the first thing that happens? We stumble. We stumble over our own memories. We stumble over the bandages we placed on our wounds. And we look for the church. The church of Jesus Christ, the body of Christ today, at present, now, and we look for help: people who will unbind us—who will forgive us so we can be set free.

Now, if you feel just even a twinge of guilt because you have not always been that type of church member then you know that we all have at times slumped from our responsibility—our calling. If you felt even a little of the guilt that we all share, then you are part

of the gospel story and you understand that you are in fact partnered with Christ in this healing because we either help one another go free or we hinder one another's trouble—and we all have them. We're all broken and wounded. If we could just admit that, how far would we go? Maybe that's why every time we have a retreat or a gathering where people actually talk to one another, we realize we don't know that much about each another.

We have learned very well to keep our wounds bound up nice and tightly. We have learned not to trouble one another with our struggles with the past, but in so doing, we have denied one another the blessing of being wounded healers. Not my words, Henry Allen's, but a wonderful image. A wounded healer is someone who sets someone else free despite their own pain.

If we are ready to hear Jesus calling to us in our darkness, we also can come out. And he will be waiting there, for he still carries for us also. He still weeps for us and he still identifies with our need, even our need for one another. That's why when he calls us back to life, he also calls us to unbind and take away all the bandages which have held us tight from which we need to be set free once and for all, so we can walk and touch and see one another maybe for the first time in a long time—as we really are: wounded healers, one for another.