

April 10, 2011

Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 11:1-45

By the Power and For the Glory

I have a friend that I'm going to call Bill in order to protect his privacy.

A few years back Bill went through a rough time. First, his job required him to move and leave the city he loved and all of his really good friends who lived there. Then his mother-in-law became ill and his wife went to spend time with her for over a month.

Then his father died, and his mother-in-law ended up passing away less than a month later.

Things weren't going real well for him at work, either. It seemed like things were just stacked against him.

As a result he became seriously depressed. Life seemed very dark and even being in counseling did not seem to help enough. Every time he made some progress, something else would happen that would set him back again.

Depression can seem like a dark prison, like you're tied up and can't break free.

Other circumstances can feel the same way---when you've lost your job, for instance, and you can't even get an interview, much less a job offer.

When the only way to improve your life would be to go back to school and get the education you need to land a better job, but you can't afford the school fees.

When your parent or your child or your spouse is seriously ill and the prognosis is dismal.

When no matter what you do or say, it seems to be the wrong thing, and people around you don't understand and are angry, and so you feel lost and alone, without a friend in the world.

When you are buried in debt and there seems to be no way to pay anything off.

Many situations can feel that the world is very dark and you can feel helpless to change that.

In our gospel reading today, we heard the story of Lazarus.

Mary and Martha were helpless to keep their brother Lazarus from dying. After he stopped breathing, they wrapped him in gravecloths---strips of cloth wound around his body----and they placed him in a tomb. They had a large stone put over the entrance to seal it.

Lazarus was in the darkness of the tomb for four days. And even though the sisters were still out walking around, their world seemed dark as well. They had lost their beloved brother, and they were grieving.

They had sent for Jesus, believing that only Jesus could keep their brother alive, and Jesus didn't come quickly enough. In fact, Lazarus had probably died before Jesus even got the word that he should come.

By the time Jesus arrived, Lazarus had been dead for four days, and Jesus had only waited two days before coming. Even if he had left right away, he wouldn't have made it in time.

Instead, he waited. When he said, “This illness does not lead to death,” maybe he knew already that he would call Lazarus out of the tomb.

And if he knew that, then leaving him in the tomb for four days would ensure that no one could argue that Lazarus had only been unconscious or in a coma. Waiting would make the miracle clear and indisputable.

The darkness that the sisters were in, meant that they blamed Jesus for being away, for not being there when they needed him. They had faith enough to believe that Jesus could have healed Lazarus. But they didn’t consider that even Jesus could raise their brother from the dead.

Jesus was about to take their faith to a whole new level, a place beyond their imaginations, beyond anything they knew.

Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb. He stood outside of it and cried with a loud voice, "Come out!" and Lazarus responded by coming out!

The people knew that they had seen something that had not happened since Elijah's day! A man was raised from the dead! And as a result many of them came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah.

In effect, Jesus had brought them all out of their own darkness and back into the light of truth and knowledge and faith.

When the first people to listen to the gospel according to John heard this account of the resurrection of Lazarus, they must have heard it as good news for the same reason that we hear it as good news---

that Jesus Christ was in fact the Son of God, the Messiah, who had come from heaven to save us from our sins.

Only God could raise someone from the dead, and Christ had prayed to God and Lazarus was alive again.

Only God has the power to bring someone who is in darkness back to the light.

Only God can free us from the gravecloths that bind us, whether they are made from fear or anxiety or stress or grief, even if we are tied up by our past which keeps us from doing something new because we have come to believe that we can't do it.

Even if we are bound by something that happened to us in the past which hurt us badly and which we have not been able to leave behind---Christ can help us to move past that pain to a new, light-filled life.

Even physical injury or illness does not need to bind our spirits if we allow Christ to shine his light in the darkness of our pain and suffering, our hopelessness and despair.

Lazarus, deep inside the tomb, deep in the darkness of death, with strips of cloth wound around him and making moving difficult,

heard Jesus call out to him, "Lazarus, come out!" There was such a depth of emotion in his voice that Lazarus felt his pulse start up again after being stopped for four days.

There was such love in those words, such power, such demand, that Lazarus began moving his legs, straining to break the cloths that held him from moving.

The power in the voice of his friend gave power to his weakened muscles, and he broke loose and managed to undo the bindings enough to stand up and walk out of the tomb.

The power in Jesus' voice brought him back to life.

Jesus proved beyond the shadow of death that he was in fact the resurrection and the life, that

Resurrection was not something for some future judgment day, that eternal life did not begin sometime in the future-----

It begins here! It begins NOW!

Lazarus didn't have to wait to be restored to life. He didn't have to wait to be set free and find the light of the world!

It was now and here! The light was found in his relationship with Jesus! Resurrection and life is for today---it begins now!

I talked to you just last week about grace that Christ offers even before you know you need it. When we baptized Saijin a few minutes ago, we acknowledged the truth of that grace.

Christ offered that grace to the woman at the well and to the man born blind.

And Christ offered it to Lazarus as well. Dead people may or may not be aware of their need for resurrection, but Christ knew, and so he called out to Lazarus to Come out!

If we listen hard enough, maybe we can hear Christ calling from outside our tombs of hopelessness and despair, of grief and pain, of suffering and shame and fear and anger.

Listen! Can you hear those words of grace being called out in a loud voice, with your name at the beginning?

Calling to you, "Come out!" ?

Listen! Christ is calling ---"Come out!"

Come out of your darkness! Come out of your fear!

Whatever has you tied up in knots, whatever keeps you in the dark----COME OUT!

Come out into the light that is Christ's love.

Come out of depression into hope.

Come out of fear into love.

Come out of pain into peace.

Come out of anxiety into trust.

Come out of whatever darkness you are in and know, for a fact, in the deepest part of yourself, that God loves you and sent Jesus Christ so that you can hear him calling to you,

“Come out!”

Christ calls and our task is to respond.

We must respond by moving toward the light and back into life.

We must get up and come out of the dead-end tomb we are in! We must allow Christ to set us free!

We do this by believing that Christ is the resurrection and the life and by coming to him when he calls to us.

My friend Bill is finally over his depression. Yes, he sought professional help, which helped him work through many things.

But the final piece of his restoration to the abundant life that Christ offers to him and to all of us, was found in listening to the voice of Christ calling to him to “come out!”

Bill began to pray under the guidance of a pastor who led him in guided prayer. As he prayed, the pastor led him through scenes of Christ's presence.

As emotions came, whether they were grief or hopelessness or pain, no matter how bad those feelings were, the pastor reminded him that Christ was right there with him, holding him as he struggled with those feelings.

And the pastor would direct him to listen for Christ's voice. What is Christ saying to you? He knows what you need to hear. Listen! He is calling you to come to him from the dark place you find yourself.

He is telling you to come out to light and life. What exact words is he saying? How is he reassuring you?

And as Bill listened for Christ's voice, he heard words of healing, words of love, words of limitless grace, and slowly he loosened the things that tied him up, he got up, and walked slowly out of the tomb of depression.

Today Bill is happy again, at peace with his life, and assured very powerfully of Christ's love.

Whenever and however you find yourself in a cold, dark place that feels far from God, where it feels like you are bound up and can't move and the way out is impossible, blocked by a huge stone, remember---

Listen for the voice of Christ calling to you to come out, offering you grace and mercy.

Christ calls to you to come out.

Come out by the power of God, which can restore you to wholeness and life!

Come out by the power of Christ, which is rooted in love!

Come out, set free from everything that hinders you, slows you down, keeps you trapped!

Come out by the power of God and live your life for the glory of God, who made you to be fully alive, now and forever!

Come out, the savior calls. We respond with everything that we are and we live for Christ, in Christ, and by Christ's love!

Amen.