

Sermon on John 11:1-45

We have another lengthy passage this week out of John's gospel. The story of the raising Lazarus sits at a turning point in his gospel. It is not just another miracle story – it's the final and most dramatic of what the gospel calls the "signs." In John's gospel, signs are not just displays of power, they are moments that reveal who Jesus is and what kind of world God is bringing into existence. This story comes right before everything changes.

After this moment, the conflict with the religious authorities intensifies quickly. In fact, immediately after Lazarus is raised, the leaders start to actively plot Jesus' death. In other words, Lazarus is raised, and Jesus' own path toward the cross becomes unavoidable. Life and death meet in this story, and we, like Lazarus, are meant to come away changed people.

Throughout the gospel, Jesus has been revealing who he is through these "I am" statements: "I am the bread of life I am the light of the world, I am the good shepherd." Here, Jesus makes another "I am" statement when he tells Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life." Notice where Jesus is when he makes this declaration: he's in a graveyard. Where one of his dearest friends lies dead in a tomb. Where Lazarus' sisters and friends are grieving. I can imagine Martha thinking to herself, "Really, Jesus? Now is not the time! You could have made it here in time to save my brother, but you delayed, and now you are just speaking empty words?"

Every time I read this story, I get mad when word reaches Jesus that Lazarus is sick and Jesus just waits. It's like every time I wish Jesus would make a different choice. I can imagine the grief and anger Mary and Martha must feel. By the time Jesus arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has been dead four days.

That detail of four days matters. In the Jewish world of the first century, there was a common belief that the soul lingered near the body for about three days. By the fourth day, death was considered fully and completely irreversible. Decay would have begun, and death would have been final, certain. John wants it to be completely clear that Lazarus is not just unconscious. Like Bones says to Captain Kirk, "He's dead, Jim." Really, truly dead.

When Jesus finally makes his appearance, Martha meets him on the road, and she says what grieving people have said across centuries: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." It is not just a statement, it's a lament. It's even a bit of an accusation.

Last week I shared one memorable story from my hospital chaplaincy days – today I'll share another. One weekend, when I was on call, I was paged to come over to the Neuro-ICU. A woman had just been declared brain-dead, and her adult daughter was there with

her. I had been present for things like this before, but from the moment I walked into that room, I knew that this was going to be a unique experience. Her daughter, in the midst of trying to process what was happening, began to demand that I heal her mother – that I needed to lay hands on her, that if I just had enough faith, if I just prayed hard enough, that she would be made well. I did my best to calmly tell her that brain-death was true death and that I could not do that. She only became increasingly loud, demanding that she knew I could bring her mother back, if only I believed enough. I can't remember what I said, but I do remember not really knowing how to respond, so I just stayed with her for a while until she grew quiet and then spoke more with her and other family as they arrived. But she was filled with grief, and rage, and accusation. I imagine she must have felt like Mary and Martha did.

When Martha and Mary grieve and rage, Jesus does not respond with long-winded theological or philosophical reflection on life and death. In fact, in this moment, he doesn't use words at all. Jesus just weeps with them, and this moment tells us something essential about God: God does not stand far away from human grief or treat suffering as an abstract problem to be solved. God stands at the edge of the tomb with us and weeps.

But then Jesus walks to the tomb and says something unexpected: "Take away the stone." Martha protests this saying "Lord, already there is a stench, because he has been dead four days." Good point, Martha. That doesn't sound like such a great idea. I mean, she is being realistic. She knows how the world works. Dead people decompose.

But Jesus prays, and then he calls out in a loud voice: "Lazarus, come out." They're probably all standing around thinking, "Jesus has lost his mind!" But Lazarus does come out. Now that must have been a sight to behold. As Lazarus comes out of the tomb, he's still all wrapped up in his grave clothes. He's alive, but he's still dressed in death.

So Jesus turns to the people standing nearby and says something important: "Unbind him, and let him go." Lazarus is raised, but he cannot free himself. He can't move well, he can't see clearly, he can't unwrap himself. He needs other people to help him. Jesus does not do it for him – instead, he tells the community to undo it. "Unbind him," Jesus says. In this way, the community actually becomes a part of the miracle!

But there is something else happening in this story that John wants us to pay attention to.

Earlier, when Jesus says to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life," Martha assumes he is talking about the distant future. She says, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." It was a common belief at that time that at the end of history God would raise the dead and set the world right.

But Jesus shifts the conversation. He does not say resurrection will happen someday. He says, in the present tense, “I am resurrection.” It’s not something later, it is now. A running theme in John’s gospel is that eternal life is not only something that begins after death, it is a different way of living in the present. We saw this in the story of Nicodemus a few weeks ago. Resurrection is actually a different way of living in the present. It’s living a life shaped by the future God is already bringing into the world.

And so this story is not only about Lazarus, it is about us. While we may not be walking out of literal tombs, many of us know what it feels like to live wrapped in grave clothes. Grave clothes are the things that keep us trapped in survival mode. They are the things that make us feel stuck. Grave clothes are the fears that whisper there is never enough: never enough security, or resources, or certainty. They are the habits of thinking that say we have to cling tightly to what we have because that is the only security we believe in. Grave clothes are the stories that we tell about ourselves and others, even when they are not rooted in truth. They are the assumptions that say the way things are now is simply the way things will always be.

Sometimes our grave clothes are personal. They can be shame, failure, the belief that we are not enough. They can be the voice that says we will never be more than we are at our lowest moments. Grave clothes can be the false narratives that the world has told us about who we are, and we need someone else to unbind us from them.

I can remember when I spent a year in Dialectical Behavior Therapy to help me learn new ways of being as I struggled with depression and anxiety. One of the things that I learned was to have people in my life who could challenge the stories I often believed about myself. Where I felt worthless, invisible, insufficient, I needed people in my life who could speak a different word to me to help me know that my story was false. I needed others to help unbind me. I could not do it myself.

Sometimes grave clothes are communal. They can be systems that exclude, or structures built on fear. They can be ways of organizing life that prioritize power over love. The truth is, we all still get wrapped up in our grave clothes, even as Jesus is calling us to new life. We can get hung up, stuck, in the old ways of living and being and we need help in order to become unbound.

Resurrection living begins when those grave clothes start to be unraveled, when they start to loosen. For us, resurrection often means needing to leave behind old habits and false narratives. Most of us know how to live in survival mode. It is the mindset that tells us to protect ourselves first, to cling to what we have, and to dig in, fearful of what uncertainty might bring.

But resurrection invites us to trust something different. It invites us to trust that God's life is bigger than our fear. It invites us to live in a different posture, with a different mindset. Resurrection invites us to imagine the kind of hope and freedom that can exist in life with God. It invites us to be more generous – not because we suddenly have excess (because that's not how this works – the prosperity gospel is not the gospel), but it's because we begin to trust that love multiplies when it is shared. Resurrection also invites us to have greater courage. It's not that the risks disappear (in fact, they may increase), but we understand that death does not get the last word. It invites us to be more compassionate, not because suffering suddenly becomes easier to face, but because we trust that life can emerge even from cold and lifeless tombs.

Resurrection living does not mean escaping the realities of the world, but it does mean that we refuse to let death-shaped thinking define us and how we move through life. It means choosing hope when cynicism or despair would be much easier. It means choosing mercy where most would seek retribution. It means choosing generosity when fear of scarcity would urge us to hold back. It's all about being unbound from the grave clothes, and we need each other to do that.

Resurrection living is truly experienced in community. It's not just about me and Jesus. We need community to remind one another that we are not defined by our worst moments. We need community to help us see who we are becoming. We need community to help one another shed the grave clothes of shame and isolation. We need community to make space for healing, to experience the practice of forgiveness, and to share resources so that no one has to live in constant scarcity.

Jesus is calling us to step out of the tomb with Lazarus, and in doing so, he also asks us to notice the places where others have been pushed into tombs – by poverty, exclusion, by stories or systems that say they are disposable and should be buried. But Jesus' resurrection life refuses to leave those tombs closed.

Every choice we make can help us more fully step into resurrection living. It's not something that happens all at once. In fact, it unfolds slowly. We show a little more courage here, a little more generosity there, and little more trust that love is stronger than fear. Most days, resurrection living is not as dramatic as Lazarus stepping out of a tomb. It's usually quieter. It might be choosing kindness in a tense conversation, or sharing what we have when someone else is struggling. It might be refusing to give up on the possibility that communities can be shaped by compassion instead of competition.

These small acts are not insignificant. They are resurrection in practice. Every time fear loosens its grip on our lives, we are practicing resurrection. Every time a community

chooses belonging over exclusion, we are practicing resurrection. Every time love breaks through a place that once felt like a tomb, resurrection is happening again.

The question for us today is, what grave clothes are we still wearing? What fears are still binding us? What old assumptions about scarcity, power, or worthiness are we still carrying around like burial cloths? And, who around us might need help being unbound as well?

Jesus calls us out of our tombs, just like Lazarus – to a life that is freer, more generous, more ruled by love. He call us to a life where grave clothes are torn away, where together we learn what it means to live in the resurrection, here and now. May it be so for us today.

Amen.