

Lent 5A (4/2/17)
 Ezekiel 37:1-14
 Psalm 130
 Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45

Resurrection is now. Although we usually think of resurrection in terms of bodily regeneration in the distant future, Jesus makes good on God's promise to bring new life from death in the present. Anywhere the living Christ calls people he loves from the depths of their deathly circumstances, there is resurrection. Nevertheless, resurrected people need neighbors to unbind them – to strip away their graveclothes, the remnants of death that prevent them from living freely in the way of abundant life that Christ has opened to them.

Did it really happen? That question has plagued people of faith since the Age of Enlightenment. In the modern context, truth is empirically verifiable. Jesus' acts of supernatural ability, however, are not, and thus have become a stumbling block to many of us. If, for instance, the raising of Lazarus defies the laws of the observable world, then the story threatens to undermine Jesus' legitimacy in general. But the first Christians, for whom the Gospels were originally written, were not concerned with any biblical story's factuality, or historicity. Simply put, truth was to be found in the narrative itself. So, the primary question for John's audience, both then and now, is not *Did it really happen?* but *What does it really mean?*

Narrative has the power to shape us, to settle in our hearts and invite us to consider new possibilities for human life. This is the purpose of the famous story in our Gospel from John today. So, what does it really

mean? **The raising of Lazarus prefigures Jesus' own resurrection, testifying to the incarnate God's power to overcome the certainty of death. Divine love, in other words, is stronger than our despair, and is centered in the person of Jesus.**

What's more, the story insists that **resurrection is now. Although we usually think of resurrection in terms of bodily regeneration in the distant future, in the raising of Lazarus, Jesus makes good on God's promise to bring new life from death in the present.** "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day," Martha surmises. But Jesus declares, "I *am* the resurrection and the life." That is, **Jesus is *already* putting death to flight, and new life is there for the taking, here and now. Anywhere the living Christ calls people he loves from the depths of their deathly circumstances, there is resurrection.**

Yet, Lazarus emerges from his tomb still bound in his graveclothes. The trappings of death are still intact, and he can't move. "Unbind him, and let him go," Jesus calls to the bystanders, inviting the community to complete the work of resurrection. **Jesus embodies God's power to give life, but Lazarus still needs neighbors to unbind him, to strip away the remnants of death that prevent him from living freely in the way of abundant life that Christ has opened to him.**

Resurrection and release:

[Rachel Held Evans, "Enough"¹]

See how Jesus loved him! Andrew was plunged into the shadow of death by fear and rejection, but by the power of steadfast love, Jesus called him out of his tomb. And **in baptism, Andrew received not only the gift of new life, but also a community to unbind him, to release him from his insecurity and shame, the lingering effects of death.**

Dear church, this is our vocation. **Bearing witness to God's power to redeem us from death, we also engage in the work of unbinding.** To borrow the words of one interpreter:

Resurrected women, men, and children today also require caring communities that are willing to nurture and strengthen them until they are able to walk alone; to remove the graveclothes of self-doubt, social isolation, marginalization, and oppression; to tear away the wrappings of fear, anxiety, loss, and grief, so that unbound women, men, and children might walk in dignity and become creative agents in the world.²

Lazarus is alive, thanks be to God, and here he is among us. Now, let's unbind him and let him go!

¹ *Searching for Sunday*, 32-5.

² Veronice Miles, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2, 144.