

Our story begins when Jesus had again escaped the Pharisees and the Temple guard after he declared “The father and I are one!” Jesus and his disciples high-tailed it to the other side of the Jordan where he taught many people. While Jesus and his disciples were there news came to him that his beloved friend, Lazarus was very ill. Although Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

<sup>7</sup>Then after this he said to the disciples, “Ok, Let us go to Judea again.” <sup>8</sup>The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?”

He told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.”

<sup>12</sup>The disciples didn’t get it. So Jesus told them plainly,  
“Lazarus is dead.” <sup>15</sup>For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. Let’s go to him.”

<sup>17</sup>When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. <sup>18</sup>Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, <sup>19</sup>and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother.

<sup>20</sup>When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.

<sup>21</sup>Martha said to Jesus,

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

<sup>22</sup>But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”

<sup>23</sup>Jesus said to her,

“Your brother will rise again.”

<sup>24</sup>Martha said to him,

“I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

<sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her,

“I am the resurrection and the life.

Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,

<sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

Do you believe this?”

<sup>27</sup>She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

After Martha said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.”

<sup>29</sup>And when Mary heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.

<sup>30</sup>Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup>The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there.

<sup>32</sup>When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Here, does Jesus follow his typical pattern of confusion clarification here? We’ve seen Jesus use this rhetoric so often in the gospels. A person comes to Jesus with a statement or question about his power or his relationship with God. Jesus makes a profound statement, the person asking responds in confusion, Jesus

clarifies his statement with an explanation, or a miracle or a parable. That's what we're accustomed to seeing Jesus do. This time it is personal. Jesus doesn't follow the same pattern. And this, in itself, makes what Jesus does next, significant evidence for us in understanding who Jesus Christ is.

<sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

<sup>34</sup>He said, "Where have you laid him?"  
They said to him, "Lord, come and see."

<sup>35</sup>Jesus began to weep.

<sup>36</sup>So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

<sup>37</sup>But some of them said,  
"Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

<sup>38</sup>Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb.

It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.

<sup>39</sup>Jesus said, "Take away the stone."

Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him,

"Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."

<sup>40</sup>Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

<sup>41</sup>So they took away the stone.

And Jesus looked upward and said,

"Father, I thank you for having heard me.

<sup>42</sup>I knew that you always hear me,

but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me."

<sup>43</sup>When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

<sup>44</sup>The dead man came out,

his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth,

and his face wrapped in a cloth.

Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

<sup>45</sup>Many of the Jews therefore,

who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

I love this story for multiple reasons – In this story we have talk of resurrection and life and trust and disbelief. We get glimpses into who Jesus is, the power of God, and who God calls us to be. It is only a very little bit is actually ABOUT Lazarus.

### **Jesus Wept.**

I think that it is significant that Jesus' and Mary's conversation and what followed did NOT follow the same confusion/clarification pattern of many of Jesus' encounters. But here, it's different. In today's story, instead of the typical banter, Jesus became deeply disturbed, and he began weeping.

It comforts me to know that Jesus wept. Why? Because here he is weeping for grief of his friend and grief for his friends. So often we put Jesus on a pedestal and say, "See, we want to be like this man – with the right

words at the right time, helping, showing love, condemning injustice, freeing the prisoners..." But then Jesus does the whole "ugly cry" and suddenly Jesus is human and awkward and sad – and utterly human – not this noble detached son of God that we expect.

And yet. It comforts me to know that Jesus wept. Why? Because this knocks Jesus off the pedestal that we put him on. Why does this comfort me, because through this very human and awkward act, I know that Jesus knows my sorrows intimately and is acquainted with all my grief.

### **Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life.**

What does Jesus mean when he says that he is the resurrection and the life? Obviously, Jesus gives a perfect example of resurrection in our story today. Resurrection is not resuscitation (breathing again) or even regeneration (born again) – but it is **living again**.

What then, does it mean, for Jesus to say that he is the living again and the life? Let's hear his words with this phrase instead.

Jesus tells Martha: I am the living again and the life that is lived. Those who believe in me, even though their bodies die, they will live,<sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Somehow that makes more sense when I take away the big words. We could put different words in there that make similar sense.

I am the Springtime and the sap. Those who believe in me, even though their leaves fall, will still have sap, and everyone with sap will live...And here's the point - Lazarus couldn't resurrect himself. The sisters Martha and Mary couldn't resurrect Lazarus. The crowd couldn't resurrect Lazarus. The disciples couldn't resurrect Lazarus. Only Christ, sent by God, could/can resurrect.

Only Christ gives life. We cannot give it to ourselves.

But there's more. He says, "Those who believe in me...will live." In order to live and to have life we must believe in the one who is the living again and the life.

What does it mean to *believe in*? I think that it means to have hope, trust and faith in the promise of something that we haven't yet witnessed. To believe in Jesus as the Christ – the Messiah – the Saviour means that we believe he is the *living again*; that he is the sustenance of life – the bread, the living water, the light of the world...And if we believe this then, even though our bodies die, we will live.

This leads me to my **third point**. I don't believe that Jesus means only our physical bodies when he talks about life and death. **Christ calls the WORLD out of death.**

Jesus calls us out of the depths of sin – to new life. We are, like Lazarus – called out of the grave – stinking and decomposing – to new tangible life – in – the – flesh. Jesus calls us out of our despair to new life of hope.

Jesus calls us out of our death, like Lazarus, not because we deserve to live – but because he loves us. See how he wept? And because it is the will of God.

But Christ doesn't only call us out of death, Christ calls the WORLD out of Death. Do you remember John 3:16: For God so loved THE WORLD that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life?

Christ calls the WORLD out of death. Christ calls Vladimir Putin out of death. Christ also calls Joe Biden and Donald Trump and every single political leader in the world out of death to living again. Christ calls the down-

and-outers at camp Hope (?) in Spokane to life. Christ calls the prisoners in Connell into life. Christ calls the people suffering from AIDS into living again. Christ calls the drug pushers and users to living again. Christ calls all you children, adults, seniors, men, women whoever you are and whatever you are – Christ calls EVERYONE to living again.

But it doesn't stop there. Christ told the crowd to unbind Lazarus and let him go. He was not alive until they took off his grave clothes. He did not participate in new life and resurrection until he was unbound by those who loved him.

### **Unbind him and let him Go.**

I like these words more than I like "Lazarus, come out."

The work of Jesus is to bring life; new life, resurrection – from death, from sin, from despair, from disease – from fear to hope, from loss to abundance. **We** cannot do this – it is the Spirit of God working within each of us that brings forth new life.

However, it **is** our work – as a people of God to unbind people from the trappings of death. To open the doors of prisons and tombs and let the voice of God be heard in all these places – to unwrap those we have kept bound.

The words that Christ speaks are so full. He says to the community surrounding the dead man, in Greek: **λύω** (lu-o) **ἀφίημι** (af-ee'-a-mee). **λύω** means: "Destroy what holds him down; Melt or dissolve his bindings." And **ἀφίημι** means "Send him forth free. Forgive him and let him be. Let go of your judgments against this man."

Christ literally tells the people to "Destroy what holds him down. Send him forth free." "Unbind him and let him go."

This is an essential part of living again. For anyone to have new life, the community must throw away the covering of death/the grave clothes and re-clothe the newly alive-again. Things have to change – stuff has to be let go – old grievances **MUST** be discarded – in order for new life to blossom.

All too often, we do not unbind those who Christ has resurrected. We would rather continue to see them the way we always have. But Christ calls us unbind and let go – to destroy what holds down and forgive and let free.

When we refuse to let someone go, when we refuse to forgive, when we refuse to see new life, it is **we** who are keeping them dead.

We bind people through our attitudes toward them. We keep people bound when we hold onto their faults instead of lifting up and encouraging their attempts to change. We keep people bound when we don't forgive them. We keep people bound when we gossip to others about their faults.

Whenever we treat people out of our smallness instead of the Lord's abundance; **we keep them bound.**

Let me give you some extreme hypothetical situations.

A former inmate from the Penitentiary has come to new life in Christ while in prison and wants to continue to grow and be challenged in his faith. While sharing his testimony with the congregation prior to baptism it comes to light that he was in prison for assault and murder.

Jesus said, "I am the living again and the life that is lived. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,<sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

And Jesus said, “Unbind him and let him go.”

A family in the congregation is shattered because of infidelity. Both partners have been hurt and are seeking reconciliation and forgiveness and counselling. Their desire is to do all that they can to come back together as a family...to have new life. But rumours have been flying. It's the wife's fault, those poor children, that poor husband...soon the wife feels ostracised from the congregation and community and no longer feels welcome in the church.

Jesus said, “I am the living again and the life that is lived. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,<sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

And Jesus said, “Unbind her and let her go.”

ok, a not so extreme hypothetical situation.

A rural congregation in Eastern Washington has been affected by Covid 19, but already before the pandemic, numbers were dropping – from age, from distance, from just the business of life. While this is typical for most rural churches in North America, this congregation still feels a sense of anxiety and fear that the church will die. Sometimes the fear paralyses the church from participating in active community ministry. Sometimes the fear paralyses the church from seeing the beautiful hope and life that surrounds it and is calling it out of death. Voices mutter, “If only we had more young people, then we wouldn't die” and “if only we were more something ... just more, then we wouldn't die.”  
Jesus told the people, “Unbind each other and be free.”

In the process of unbinding others, we ourselves are unbound. When we let go, we are set free. When we entrust our loved ones to God's eternal care, when we forgive, when we see beyond the shroud of darkness and fear, it is then when we loose the bounds.

We free people when we are determined to see new life in them. We free them when we praise God. We free them when we forgive them. We free them when we smile and welcome them. Whenever we treat people out of Christ's greatness and not our smallness; we free them.

And this is not done alone. Friends, we cannot unbind the resurrected by ourselves. Sometimes grief is too raw, sometimes hope seems distant and far – sometimes we have been hurt almost beyond forgiveness. It is then that we need each other. Unbinding is something done in community. We help each other unbind and set free.

Jesus said, “**I am** the living again and the life that is lived. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God? Give me a chance here to show you that God can do wonderful things”

<sup>43</sup>When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” <sup>44</sup>The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. And Jesus said to those gathered...and Jesus says to us. “Unbind him and let him go.”

Unbind that spirit of God. We can't do it by ourselves. We can't be alive again by ourselves. Unbind that Spirit of God in our midst and let it Go!