

"Lent 5—Out of the Tomb"
April 2, 2017
Text: John 11:17-45

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ
Fifth Sunday in Lent

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.

Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.

Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.

Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 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. 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."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see."

Jesus began to weep.

So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.

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."

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

So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. 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."

When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

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."

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

What a dreadful thought to be trapped in a tomb before our time. What a dreadful thought to be in a tomb at all. And what a strange story to hear that Jesus shows up so late to a situation, where if he had arrived earlier, someone would still be alive. That might cause a person considering following Jesus to have some real doubts. Yes, Lazarus is dead. Even Jesus says it in the verses leading up to today's reading from the Gospel of John. He's been dead four days and is sealed in a tomb. And now two heartbroken sisters are wondering why Jesus has not come sooner. And now the excruciating pain of grief has set in. What kind of timing is that, Jesus?

Do You Believe?

They live in Bethany. It's close to Jerusalem. And Jesus finally arrives. Martha comes out to greet Jesus as he arrives. If only she could race out to meet him with her brother like they used to. But he's gone now.

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

It's her deepest desire to have her brother back.

Jesus says to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Thank God for that voice of hope, that voice that strengthens our faith.

Martha says to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last

day.” She understands how it works from her Jewish background. The idea of resurrection was not new with Jesus. The Pharisees and rabbinic Judaism held that there would be a resurrection at the “end of days,” and it would represent a complete nationalistic revival for the people of God. We all have some idea of what is meant by resurrection. We each have in our mind some kind of concept of what happens when we die.

But Jesus says to Martha, *“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this, Martha?”*

What a question! But this is the central question. This is the crux of our faith. Do we truly believe what we say we believe? God is testing our faith and refining it, at times, like a precious metal in the fire.

“Yes, Lord,” Martha says, *“I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”*

The Heart of Jesus

Funerals are not easy. Hearts are heavy. Stress is high. And emotions are raw. When Martha goes back and gets Mary, Mary gets up quickly and goes to Jesus. And she goes with the other Jews who had come to console the sisters. And when they get to Jesus Mary kneels at his feet and says the same thing as Martha, *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”*

Jesus sees her weeping, and he sees the Jews who came with her also weeping, he is greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He says, “Where have you laid him?” They say to him, “Lord, come and see.”

And then, perhaps the most poignant moment in all of the gospels. The very brief John 11:35:

Jesus begins to weep.

“See how he loved him!” the people say.

Jesus is God; fully God. But Jesus is a human being. He fully embodies and expresses human emotion. And as the prophet Isaiah said of him long before he was born, he is a man acquainted with grief.

But the pain of grief is real for all that day and their faith is being tested, and some of them say, *“Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”*

Raised From the Dead!

Yup. Lazarus is dead; held in the darkness of a tomb.

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, comes to the tomb. And hear this. It is a sign of things to come: The tomb is a cave, and a stone is lying against it. And Jesus says, *“Take away the stone.”*

Unseal that tomb! Get some light of day in there! Now, there’s all kinds of tombs, isn’t there? There are many ways we get trapped in something with seemingly no way out. Years can go by as we live like the walking dead. I have a friend I met in college who is an accomplished painter. Extremely gifted. But back in those days he was a

raging alcoholic. For several years he was as good as dead, to himself and everyone around him. Then one day he reached the bottom and finally sobered up and walked out his tomb. With my own eyes I have seen his life transformed, I have seen his talent resurrected, and his family restored.

I can speak from my own personal experience and say I am living proof that a person can be called out of a tomb. Not only did I survive a heart attack five years ago, which, in and of itself, was a miracle, but my entire life was resurrected at that time as I experienced the clear call from God in my spirit to enter into full-time ministry. Years of darkness suddenly came to an end as I found a purpose and knew what I would do for the rest of my life. Light began to shine.

The good news is that there comes the voice, at some point, of the One who says, *"Take away the stone."*

Maybe not a good idea. Martha, says to him, *"Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."*

Come on, Martha! You gotta believe!

Jesus says, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

Do you believe? The question keeps coming back. Do you believe? Again, our faith is being tested and refined. And under these extreme circumstance where life and death hang in the balance, the question strikes at the heart of who we are and what we really believe. And it matters now because,

They're taking away the stone. And Jesus looks up and says, "Father, I thank you for hearing me. 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."

You see, Jesus did not come to deliver a eulogy on this day. On this day he comes to shout a cry of new life. Today he comes to awaken the dead. You know what he shouts, say it with me:

"Lazarus, come out!"

Then the dead man comes 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."

It is the moment of resurrection. Jesus has the power and the compassion to raise someone from the dead in this life and the next. It's the moment you realize a tomb cannot hold you anymore.

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

The Table of the Lord (On the occasion of Communion Sunday)

Do you believe? Jesus says more than once, *"I am the resurrection."* Do you believe it? This very question is the foundation of our faith. And when this is settled, hope is restored—the kind of hope that once easily lived in us when we were children without a care in the world.

Here in the final weeks of Lent the story of Lazarus foreshadows the resurrection of Jesus from the tomb after the crucifixion. And the story of Jesus foreshadows our own resurrection from all that would keep us in bondage—including death itself.

As a gift from God, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus enters our lives, and when he calls us out of our tombs, eternal life begins. It has already begun. The Table of the Lord witnesses to this reality.

This Table is set on the belief that Christ has died, Christ is risen and Christ will come again. This Table is set on the belief that the Holy Spirit remains with us. This Table is set on the hope that God's grace is still moving in our lives and releasing us from what holds us in bondage. This Table invites us to share the bread and the cup, which are the sure signs that Jesus' promise of resurrection has been kept and we are no longer prisoners of the tomb. And like the resurrected Lazarus, we can be happy to hear the words, "It's time to come to the Table." Amen.