



February 27, 2005
Lent 3

John 11:38-44
Leaving the Tombs
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This is the third in a series of sermons on the death and raising of Lazarus. I began this series by claiming Jesus loves you too much to fulfill your expectations and dreams. That's because he has his own dreams for you that are greater than anything you have imagined. Last Sunday we encountered Jesus' chilling question, "Do you believe this?" Today we discover that whether we believe it or not, Jesus refuses to abandon us to the tombs where we are losing our lives.

Well, Jesus did not do what Mary and Martha, and I imagine Lazarus wanted him to do. He did not get there in the nick of time to save Lazarus's life. Now Lazarus is dead. It must have been agonizing for his sisters to watch him slowly slip away, and then to place him in a tomb and roll the stone across the door.

If you have ever watched someone die, you know that in spite of what Hollywood portrays, death is not pretty. It doesn't smell good. It hurts. It certainly hurts the loved ones who sit by the deathbed to watch someone they love die because they're powerless to stop it.

This feeling of powerlessness is one of the reasons we don't talk about death very much. Just try to hang around the copy machine at work, and get a good conversation going on death and dying. You will have the machine all to yourself in no time. But in spite of our refusal to talk about it, we experience death all the time. Life is a matter of enduring one loss after another, and it's never pretty. There is not a one of us who has not witnessed the death of something, or someone, we cherished.

What have you ever succeeded in holding in this life? Did you get to hang on to your children? Or your parents? Did you get to keep your youth, work, health, or your plans for life? Even if you are still holding these things for now, you know it's only a matter of time before you have to give them up.

After a while the losses of life start to pile up on you. The day you realize that you have lost more than you're still holding is a dangerous day. The danger is that is the day when you are tempted to give up.

It isn't just Lazarus who is in the tomb. It is you and me. We entered that tomb the day we gave up on life, the day we gave up adventure for security and settled for life without passion, risk, or a clear sense of mission. We entered the tomb the day we settled for a city where mothers sleep in cars with their children, while others who don't even have cars now may not have bus service

either. We entered the tomb the day we said, "That's the way it is and you can't change it. Life is hard but at least I have my little garden in good shape. I had better not take any chances with it. I won't risk getting involved. I won't let my heart get wounded again. I will never be vulnerable again. Instead, I will just hang onto to my neat, orderly, lonely little life." On that day we just walked into a tomb and rolled the stone shut.

We may get a little excited about our little vacation plans, our schemes for making a little more money, or our plans for buying a little more furniture. But to be clear, this is *little* more than redecorating our tombs.

Jesus will not settle as easily as we do. He has no interest in helping you remodel your tomb. So he stands before the sepulchers of our lives and says, "Take away the stone." You have been dead long enough. It is time to come back to life. Remember Jesus did not prevent Lazarus's death for the same reason he does not prevent the loss of the things you hold close to your heart. It is not because he does not love you. It is because he loves you so much, he wants to give you a new life - life in Christ - that you can only have when you let go of the dead one to which you are clinging.

"Take away the stone." Jesus says. "Lord!" Martha exclaimed, "Already there is a stench because he has been dead four days" Isn't that wonderful? "Lord, this is just death. Everyone knows death. It stinks! But you can't do anything about loss - it's just the way it is." Jesus responded "Did I not tell you that if you believe you would see the glory of God?"

That is what belief is for Christians. It is a way of seeing. If we can only believe in *what* we see, we would have to submit to the power of the tomb. But if we believe in *who* we see, the Savior, then we have found a power greater than the tomb. That is why we keep coming to worship, and why I keep inviting you to a daily devotional life. It is often difficult to see Jesus, but worship is how we renew our vision of the inapparent presence of the risen Savior.

Some of you may have traveled to Jerusalem. Maybe you have also been to the suburb Bethany, and visited the tomb that by tradition was the place where Lazarus was buried. It is a small, cold, dark, dark, place. Actually, even if you have never been to Bethany the chances are very good that you have been in that tomb at some point in your life. Maybe it was when you came home to tell your children you had lost your job. Maybe it was when the doctor tried to explain about finding more of the disease. Or maybe it was when someone hurt you and broke your heart. Yes, I think you probably know exactly what Lazarus's tomb looks like. It is a cold, dark, dark, place. The question is: once you get there ... can you still see the Savior? Can you still believe?

Well, the best part of the Gospel story is that Jesus isn't even limited by our unbelief or our half belief or our belief mixed with unbelief. According to the text, surrounded by so much doubt, Jesus still steps up to the tomb, and he calls you by name: "Lazarus, come forth." Come out of your grief ... you've been in there long enough. Come out of your fear. Come out of your cynicism and comfortable despair. Come out of your constant complaining. Aren't you tired of that? Come forth from the dark place where you've been nurturing all that hurt. Come forth from being the victim.

Why are you settling for this? This is a place of death. Come forth and choose life! The Savior is calling for you, and he is bidding you to come back to life.

Now what? The Resurrection and the Life has pulled back the stone from the door of your tomb and is calling you to return to life. Now what? Well, now you have a choice to make. It doesn't matter how beat up you have been, no one can take away your capacity to make choices. When Jesus comes to the door of your tomb, and invites you into a new life you can either choose to stay in the tomb or you can believe there is a new life waiting outside of it.

Maybe you don't think you have that much belief or faith. Maybe you can't see your way out the door of your grief or hurt just yet. Maybe. Just don't wait for the faith to come, because there is little power in our faith. No, the power is in the Savior who is calling for you. Garrison Keillor has written that faith is like the nose on the end of your face. "If you focus on it too closely, it will make you dizzy." Don't focus on the faith. Focus on the grace. Focus on the Savior who knows your name and persistently calls you to come forth. "Lazarus, Jane, Ruth, Craig ... time to come out of the tombs!"

"Then the dead man came out, his hands and his 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 striking that Jesus gives the dead man new life, but he doesn't unbind him. That is our job - it is the task of the brothers and sisters in the family to help people walk in the new life Jesus gives. Your job is NOT to save the people at work, the city neighborhoods, or even your own family. Only Jesus can do that, and he will do that. Your job, your mission, is to see the life giving work of Jesus in others and in seeing to thus believe. You believe not just for yourself but for others. No one has enough faith to leave a comfortable tomb by themselves. "My faith" is never strong enough. To walk in new life we need to lean on the faith of others. We need the great faith of the church that unbinds us and lets us go. But you can only be of use to the Savior's liberating work in the lives of others if you have abandoned your own tomb.

Your disappointment and grief has been great. I know. But the stone has been rolled back now, and the Savior is calling for you. Isn't it time to come forth? Life is waiting. All that it costs is giving up death. Amen.