

All of us aspire to have our lives matter.
We want to make a difference,
to create a legacy.

Yet, overshadowing every human aspiration and achievement
is the dark cloud of death,
with a sampling of anonymity and futility.

Death erases our most important relationships
and sweeps away our proudest achievements
in its grim tide of forgetfulness and nonbeing.

In response humanity has twisted and distorted ourselves
with dreams of escaping or denying its futility.

We cling to things;
false promises,
dreams of security;
We seek escape in sensual and materialist self-indulgence;
we trample our neighbors
in desperate attempts to feel worthy and substantial,
to be just a bit... more significant, than the rest.

Yet here, Jesus approaches Lazarus' tomb greatly disturbed.
The original wording here connotes anger.
Jesus approaches Lazarus' tomb angry with death.

The incarnate Word,
in that very moment,
embraces the heart of the human dilemma,
moved by compassion for our plight.
standing in the face of human singularity,
the loss of one middle eastern man,
who was but a blip on the grand stage of humanity,
the transcendent power and intelligence
that formed the entire universe and sustains it,
feels deep compassion;
sheds tears for a friend,
steps into;
fully embraces...eerr embodies;
lives with;
feels deeply;
the loss of this **one** man.

Jesus, in this very sign,
shows us just how deeply
God takes an active interest
in human existence.

The Creator and Lord of the entire cosmos
here engages the deepest contradictions of human life
and through fathomless compassion
shows that God is radically *on our side*.

I hope for just a moment,
you've taken that in.
You've heard that,
not just listened,
but heard that.

Let me say it in again in another way,
the Eternal God,
the Alpha and Omega,
the great I AM,
cares enough about this one man
who had died and been buried for days,
that even death itself was not enough to stop God's love.

To bring this into perspective
I want to talk about another moment in time,
Another tomb, another pile of rocks.
This one is happening today.
I want to tell you about the White Helmets.

A few weeks ago, a friend of mine recommended watching
the netflix documentary, The White Helmets.
It's raw, and devastating, powerful and touching.
You absolutely should go watch it.

It tells the powerful story of the the Syrian Civil Defence organization,
better known as the white helmets for the hard hats they wear.

When the bombs rain down, they rush in.
They literally gather at a spotter station
(think fire station),
and stand on the roof listening and looking for helicopters and jets.

In a whoosh of a helicopter or a roar of a jet,

and the explosion streets away,
they hop in their vehicles and rush to those place,
and roll away the stones,
Pulling survivors from the ground.

In that place where public services no longer function
these unarmed volunteers risk their lives
to help anyone in need
- regardless of their religion or politics.

These self-less volunteer rescue workers
operate in one the most dangerous places on earth.

The documentary follows one team through the streets of Aleppo,
where you see them get dressed in the morning,
kiss their families goodbye,
and charge towards explosions.

As the conflict in Syria worsens,
ordinary people are paying the highest price.
Reports are that more than 50 bombs and mortars a day
land on some neighbourhoods in Syria.
Many are what they call barrel bombs,
basically rusty barrels filled with nails, shrapnel and explosives,
Then they are rolled out the back of government helicopters
-- markets and shops are the most commonly hit targets.

When this happens the White Helmets rush in
to search for life in the rubble -
fully aware that more bombs may fall on the same site.
At their last released count, their volunteers
Former tailors, bakers, teachers and other ordinary Syrians
have banded together to save 85,228 lives
from the rubble of bombardment.

Unarmed and impartial,
They're on the side of life.

For a little while longer,
we linger in this Lenten season,
this season of self-denial,
this time of leanness for our souls,
We clear the space so that we can hear stories

about amazing people like those who don these white helmets.

We need to hear the stories of hope, of people
who run towards the hardest parts of our lives and world,
rather than cower away from it.

Lent is about building within ourselves the resolve
to do incredibly selfless things, like these white helmets do,
To walk towards the tomb, set to unbind our fellow civilians.

We need stories like the most famous one told of the white helmets,
about the team in aleppo the one you follow in the documentary
who were responsible for pulling the “miracle baby,”
a 10 day old baby back in 2014,
from under a collapsed 3 story building.
You may have heard about it again,
when in August that it was report that the man who pulled the baby free,
died, in a bombing, attempting to unbind others.

That’s what this Lazarus’ story is,
it is Jesus providing a sign,
putting us on notice,
to pay attention,
And also to remind us
that mere weeks away,
we will celebrate once more,
that death itself will end.

**This text invites us to reflect on
what difference it makes,
in dealing with daily joys and heartbreaks,
to know that the entire scope of our lives,
from birth to death and beyond,
is the object of this compassionate Divine interest.**

One might just see the logic of the apostles in Romans
who say “If God is for us, who is against us?”

We listen as they wonder out loud,
if Jesus’ tears are indicative of love or regret;
we hear the strain in his voice as he instructs them
to remove the stone that covers the tomb;
we sense the anticipatory tension

as profound faith and debilitating doubt converge.
We know the conclusion,
yet breathlessly await Lazarus' emergence from the tomb.

And we are relieved to see Lazarus' emergence from the grave
revealing God's intention.

Just as the White Helmets live by their motto,
"to save one life is to save all of humanity."
For to them, it must be like each life saved is a sign,
showing all their intention,
that the war will end,
but until it does,
they will remain,
pulling survivors from among the rocks.

That is not unlike God's intention for us that we become
not just witnesses to this divine communion,
but participants in its power and life.

It is an invitation that rebukes a conventional understanding of discipleship,
as grounded in willed obedience to external commands
- simply following a set of rules.
Such discipleship is often motivated by nagging
and marked by a strong sense of guilt.

In contrast, John paints a picture in which
devotion to Jesus draws people into the life of God.
Discipleship here involves believers joyfully saying yes
to divine love - and eventually eternal life -
that appears among and within them as Christ
through the Spirit draws them
into his shared communion with the Creator.

Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead
with a personal word of command:
"Lazarus, come out!"
(which can lend itself to all sorts of alternative perspectives)
which shows us that resurrection is the work of Christ himself.
And also foreshadows that day when all in the grave will hear his voice and come out.

And yet, it also shows us that when confronted
with the reality of death in the world,
Jesus is disturbed,

is down right angry,
at the pain and grief that it causes.
And he invites us to join into the end of it.

When the dead man came out 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."

John, in those few words,
is offering us a vignette,
a picture of the church's life:
Christ through baptism raises believers to new and righteous life,
but sinful habits and temptations of the old life still encumber us
and obscure our vision.
And still Christ entrusts us,
his disciples, with the task of unbinding each other
from these remnants of our old lives that persist
in the aftermath of our redemption.

We are tasked, because we are not bound,
to be the ones that unbind others,
just like the powerful example of the white helmets,
they have found purpose within tragedy,
the ability to pull life from the jaws of death,
to unbind their fellow citizens,
to free them from the devastation that surrounds them.

Let this picture clarify the respective roles of Christ
and his disciples in the life of faith and growth of grace.
Christ calls out to each of us,
but **we must be the ones to unbind each other**,
to follow through on the redemption that Christ has begun in each of us.
That by uniting with one another in ministries of encouragement and mutual accountability,
we too may shed the tatters of our burial garb and be free to unbind others.

Not so that we will be remembered,
or leave a legacy,
But so that love will be remembered,
that hope will hold,
that despite the devastation that runs rampant through our world,
we can still be part of unbinding another.

Discipleship must be about saying yes to divine love,

and not to just witness it, but to live into it.
Not to treasure it or protect it,
but to risk it boldly,
because we can be assured that the compassionate God stands with us
and behind us
and most importantly knows our name,
and isn't afraid to use it,
and call us out.

I implore you, to go and read more,
or listen to the volunteers who are a part of the White Helmets.
Hear their stories, to listen to their language;
Witness the self-giving love they represent.
When asked why they do it one said,
"We feel as if we've brought that person back to life, the joy is indescribable."

In a sign of God's glory, death is overcome.
However, the burial cloths that bind Lazarus (and Syria)
are a reminder that death still clings.
On another day, another Mary, weeping at another tomb...
on that day, the burial cloths will be left behind in the tomb
- no longer required for the one whom God has raised.

On that day, the disciples will see something even greater
than the raising of Lazarus.
Here, at the tomb of Lazarus,
death is denied for a time.
There, at the tomb of Jesus,
death is overcome for good.

And through that tomb,
all tombs will be emptied,
and Love will win.