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Death and Deliverance

John 11:38-44

You may remember the absurd plot of the movie, "Death Becomes Her." The story line of the movie deals with two women, one played by Meryl Streep and the other by Goldie Hawn. These women both take a magic potion that promises to keep them from aging. The potion actually gives them immortality. The women take the magic elixir, but to their horror they begin to fall apart, I mean literally fall apart; parts fall off their bodies. The women then scheme to have another character, a plastic surgeon played by Bruce Willis, drink the potion so that he can spend his eternity fixing their continuously damaged bodies.

It is a ridiculous story line. The two women, completely self absorbed and vain beyond description, are focused on avoiding the realities of aging. In the long run, they continue to age and even decay, but never actually die. The movie does give the viewer the opportunity for one laugh after another. As I recall there is one point when Meryl Streep's head is on backwards and Goldie Hawn has a huge hole in her abdomen. The movie makes fun not only of our fear of aging, but also of our fear of death.

Death carries great power in our culture. We are terrified of death. We avoid talking about it, we run from it, we hide from it and in the process, we give the word even more power. We, humans, have given death this great power. Our faith teaches us not to fear death; our faith teaches us that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the sting has been removed from death. However, we cling to the backside of the Resurrection. We cling to shadows and fears. Though we dream of living with out fear, we have yet to accomplish our dream. In this story of Lazarus, Jesus speaks directly to us about the reality of death.

First, Jesus quiets the anxiety of the disciples. He, Jesus, is going back to Bethany. He may be in harm's way there, but he is not going to let that possibility deter him from going to offer his care for Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. To live life to the fullest means allowing love to overcome fear. Jesus' love for this family is greater than his concerns for his own safety. That in itself is an entire sermon for another day.

Secondly, when Jesus speaks with both Mary and Martha, they share their frustration with Jesus by blaming him for Lazarus' death. Jesus wasn't there, he didn't get there quickly enough, and Lazarus dies because Jesus was not there. It is a human nature to search for the explanation for an event. It is human nature to find someone to blame even for the most natural reality in our human experience - death.

Jesus is moved by the grief of the sisters. He weeps as well. Be assured that there is sting to death. When we are face to face with the death of one we have known and loved, we hurt. The sting is physical as well as emotional. We are struck by the death of a loved one; even breathing becomes a chore. Our broken heart is slow to heal; the hole in our life is painfully evident day in and day out. The sting is real. What Jesus teaches us is that the sting, the brokenness and the pain is not the eternal, because death is not the last word. Life is stronger than death. Life with Christ is stronger than death right here and now and life with Christ is stronger than death eternally.

Finally, Jesus calls to Lazarus, who has spent four days in a tomb to, "Come Out!"
John 11:38-44

Come out Lazarus! Come out of the darkness, come out of the confinement, come out from that which binds you and live.

When Randy and I were in Israel, we went down a narrow cobblestone street and were led down a narrow stairway under the street to a cave that is traditionally identified as the place where Lazarus was entombed. It was dark, damp and a horrible little space. Be it the actual place where Lazarus lay or not, it is a perfect metaphor for all of us.

Come out of those places that hold you in fear. Come out of those shadows that keep you from embracing life to the fullest. Come out of that which binds you and keeps you living in a small way when our faith invites you to live abundantly.

I know that this is the season of Lent, but we are the people of the Resurrection this day and every day and we are called to live as such. Our God has taken charge of death. We don't have to run from it, or try to hide from it, or fear it. We need not try to shelter our children from death.

We need to speak of death and plan for death. God has already removed the power from death and now we are called to open ourselves to the prospect of death, the inevitability of death and in the process take the fear from death.

Am I ready to die? Absolutely not! But what I fear about death is not the final reality; not the point in time when I do not wake up anymore, but rather it is the process of dying that makes me nervous, that makes me fearful. Ultimately, we will be with God. Our love relationship with God will continue through eternity. That truth brings me a sense of peace, not fear. It is the journey there that makes me fearful. I have seen suffering and I would rather skip that if at all possible. I would prefer to die in my sleep. My maternal grandmother lived until she was almost 104 years old. That sounds great to me. I would like to fall asleep for the last time somewhere around 104 years old.

Who knows how I will die? My own genetics or an accident with a car or a difference of opinion with a horse, or a million other options may place me on my path toward dying. How I will die, how you will die, I have no clue.

I read an account recently by a man named Ed Dobson who writes about turning 50 and finding out he was terminally ill. He writes, "When you are told you have an incurable and terminal disease, no words can describe the sinking feeling you have. Outside Jerusalem, beyond the Mount of Olives, there is a place called Bethany, the ancient home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Up one of the back alleys is a Second Temple period tomb. Outside the tomb a sign indicates, "The Tomb of Lazarus." After paying a modest entrance fee, visitors descend a long spiral staircase. Down and down and down. When they reach the bottom, they crawl under a large stone, and on the other side they see a burial chamber. It is far from the warmth of the sunshine on the street, dark, confining, and claustrophobic. This is what a terminal disease feels like. You descend from the warmth and sunshine into a dark and confining space. You descend into the tomb of Lazarus, and you think that you will never return to the sunshine."

I am going to die and so are you and that is certain. Thanks be to God who has the final word on our death. Whatever the path of dying, God will be with us, right there with us every moment of the process. I don't know if there will be people standing close by holding my hand or if I will be on my own. I do know that we will never be alone in the process, because our God will be with us welcoming us into life beyond this life.

Ed Dobson goes on to write, "Every day is a struggle, and every day I must do all I can to keep climbing the staircase out of the tomb."

Reading of Dobson's experience reminded me of the experience of my foster sister. Both of her parents died of cancer and in her thirties, she was diagnosed with terminal breast cancer. She too went down, down, down to a dark, dingy place in her life. She would find though that terminal does not always mean swift. She would live fifteen years after her diagnosis. She would climb back out of the darkness and dance again in the light during those years. She continues to be an inspiration to me of one who lived faithfully and abundantly in the midst of dying.

I do not know what binds and holds you. It may be a physical struggle, it may be an emotional wound that just doesn't seem to heal, it may be a fear that you have carried for years, it may be that you have just grown bored or weary with the number of days that you have been given. This is a day that we have been given and we have the opportunity to live this day in such a way that honors God. Beyond this day, well that is anyone's best guess.

Jesus calls to each of this day, "Come out!" Come out from the fears that hold you. Come out and set aside that which binds you. Come out of the shadows and dance in the light. We do not know what tomorrow will hold, but we do know that today is before us.

I am confident that Lazarus came out of that dark, dingy tomb and leaped for joy! Can you imagine? He was dead and then he was alive. He was buried and then released. But, of course you can imagine - that is the reality of our life with Christ. Once we were no people, now we are God's people. Once we had life, but were not fully alive. By our

baptism in Christ, we are alive fully and completely by God's grace. We too are called to come out of the shadows and dance in the light!

Death – yes it has its sting. But your death and mine, it is a part of living. We will not run, we will not hide; we will live this day and every day, committed to seeing with God's eyes, imagining to the best of our ability the world that God envisions, and allowing our joy for life to become contagious as we share the love of God with others.

In *Death Becomes Her*, the plastic surgeon character never actually takes the magic potion. He lives his life and then he dies. It is clear at his funeral service that he has had a life of meaning and purpose. He has had more life than that of either of the women who have an endless number of days, but never found the inspiration to live them faithfully or abundantly.

Immortality, is that our deliverance? I don't think so. The love of God, the presence of God through all times and situations, the grace of God to accept us as we are and transform us to who we might become; that is our deliverance. The promise has already been made and the act of love already given through the one Jesus Christ.

What have we to fret? What have we to fear? Know that this is the day that we have been given. Live it. Allow the love of God shape your words and actions this day. Allow the grace of God to rush over you and give you confidence that you belong to God. Allow the hope of God to infuse you so that you may see as God sees and act with God's loving intentions.

Come out and live! It is God's invitation and Jesus' command.