

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Robert Alexander
John 11:32-44
"Unbind Him!"
All Saints' Sunday
November 1, 2015**

One of the things I love about the Gospel according to John is the way that he spends time with a story. We have some of the longest narratives about the people with whom Jesus interacts in John. He describes in great detail the encounters that Jesus had with Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the man born blind, and of course Lazarus. Lazarus was from Bethany, a small town not far from Jerusalem. Jesus and his disciples had been in Jerusalem in chapter 10 where his words and actions had stirred up trouble and he narrowly escaped arrest. To get some space from that situation, they left and went to the other side of the Jordan River and remained there where Jesus ministered to the people who continued to come to him for healing and wisdom. It was in this remote place that Jesus received word from Mary and Martha – the sisters of Lazarus – that he was very sick. Going to see them in Bethany would mean going back into the hornet's nest where people were out to get him. So, to the surprise of the disciples and the great disappointment of Mary and Martha, Jesus waited two more days before making the trip. John tells the reader that the reason behind this delay is to bring glory to God. We pick up the story after Jesus and the disciples arrive in Bethany and after Lazarus has already died.

READ JOHN 11:32-44

Years ago I received a call in the middle of the night from a member of the church I served. This person's husband had not returned home that night and the family had received word from the authorities that someone matching his description had been found. As I spent the next several hours with her and her family members our worst fears were confirmed. Her husband had died suddenly and unexpectedly and we were all in shock.

Over the next several days I wanted desperately to be able to call him back from the grave. I saw the pain that the family was going through and all I could do was cry with them and try to offer words of hope in God's grace and abiding love. That is part of what we do in the church. We sit with each other in our pain and sadness and we try in our own feeble ways to point to the good news of God's resurrection power.

Jesus spent time with the family of Lazarus, but the text tells us that he had been in the tomb for four days before Jesus' arrival. The burial custom of the day was that a person would be buried within 24 hours of their death. Their body was washed, anointed with aromatic oils and spices, and then wrapped with strips of cloth. There was special attention to binding the hands and feet so that the limbs would stay together. The head was also bound so that the jaw would not drop and the mouth would not come open. We don't know who prepared Lazarus' body for burial. Most likely it was someone who cared about him – a family member – a loved one.

(James Bragg becomes Lazarus)

We can imagine that during the preparation for burial emotion would likely wash over the loved one and it would begin to sink in that this person had died and was no more. Their life on earth had passed and they were at rest.

For Jesus to show up and join the mourning four days after all this had taken place must have been a huge disappointment to the family. They were exhausted. Their emotions were raw. Perhaps they were angry with Jesus for not being there sooner. Mary told him – “if you had been here my brother wouldn’t have died.” You can hear the pain in her words. Jesus said nothing – but simply cried. He shed tears with his friends.

But then – this man – this Messiah – this one who is called the *resurrection and the life* – displayed power in a way that is hard for us to fathom. Regardless of the fact that he was close to Jerusalem – the place where he himself would soon die – he called Lazarus from the grave in broad daylight - stunning the family and those friends who were gathered to mourn. Despite the protests of concerned onlookers who feared the odor of a decomposing corps behind that stone – Jesus commanded that the stone be removed and then with a shout yelled – “Lazarus, come out!” I really don’t think it is possible for us to grasp what that scene must have been like.

Perhaps you, like I, have spent time with a grieving family and wished that you had that same kind of power to bring new life into a situation of loss. Perhaps you have sat hoping, praying that the loved ones eyes would open again and they would live. But they never did. Still our faith invites us to believe and to trust that even though our loved one is resting in the grave that they will be raised to new life by a power that is beyond us. And this resurrection power that God offers – bringing life in the midst of death – hope in the midst of despair – joy in the midst of sorrow – is a power that is already alive in each one of us. In Christ we have new life and we are set free!

I have often wondered what Lazarus talked about after this experience. Did he remember anything? Was his experience like waking from a long sleep or a coma? Did this second chance at life change him in any way? I’ve known people who have survived a near death experience and many times they do have a completely new outlook on life. Perhaps his experience was like one who nears the end of their life and they realize that if they had it to do over they would do some things differently.

American humorist Erma Bombeck was once asked if she would do anything differently if she had her life to live over. She described some of her thoughts in an essay that was later published in the book *Eat Less Cottage Cheese and More Ice Cream*. She says things like...

- I would have invited friends over to dinner even if the carpet was stained and the sofa faded.
- I would have burnt the pink candle that was sculptured like a rose before it melted while being stored.
- When my child kissed me impetuously, I would never have said, "Later. Now, go get washed up for dinner."
- I would have taken the time to listen to my grandfather ramble about his youth.
- There would have been more I love yous ... more I'm sorrys ... more I'm listenings ... but mostly, given another shot at life, I would seize every minute of it ... look at it and really see it ... try it on ... live it ... exhaust it ... and never give that minute back until there was nothing left of it."ⁱ

This reminds me of Ebenezer Scrooge’s transformation in *A Christmas Carol*! The ghosts from the grave can open our eyes to the places where we aren’t really alive. I wonder what they would tell us about how we might still be bound.

Perhaps we are the ones who need to be unbound and set free. We are given new life in Christ but we are – in so many ways – still tied up in grave clothes. Trying to please everyone – trying to meet everyone’s expectations – trying to feed our deep hunger with everything but the Bread of Life – trying to

satisfy our thirst with everything but the water that springs up to eternal life. But Jesus has come to give us new life and to set us free to live that life fully. Even though it means his own death – he knows that death does not have the final answer. Life does. God does!

Joy Cowley in her book Psalms Down Under has written from the perspective of Lazarus.

I don't intend it to happen. It just sneaks up on me
And before I know it there's been a kind of death,
Part of me is wrapped in a shroud
And buried in a tomb
While the rest of me stands by
Wondering why the light has gone out.
Then you, my Friend, all knowing,
Seek me out and knock
At the edge of my heart,
Calling me to come forth.
I argue that I can't.
Death is death and I'm too far gone
For story book miracles.
But you keep on calling,
"Come forth! Come forth!"
And the darkness is pierced By a shaft of light
As the stone begins to move.
My Friend, I don't know how you do it
But the tomb has become
As bright as day, as bright as love,
And life has returned.
Look at me!
I'm running out,
Dropping bandages all over the place.ⁱⁱ

Our Friend, our Lord, our Savior Jesus Christ has given us new life and we are invited to live it – but perhaps we need help being unbound from the things that once held us so tightly. Perhaps we need help being set free from the actions, attitudes, and perspectives that have held us captive in our tombs. And perhaps in the community of faith we are called to that kind of activity as together we journey in faith. We don't have the power to raise someone from the dead but we do have the power to help unbind and set loose those whom Christ has given life. That resurrection power is alive in us to support one another in this journey of transformation.

Sitting with that family so long ago didn't bring their loved one back but the relationships of love and compassion have helped sustain them and set them free from their own sadness and fear and anger. In this journey together, we all have been transformed by God's resurrection power!

So where and how does this unbinding occur?

It occurs in community – in relationship with others. And here at the table is a good place to start. Here, where we gather with the saints, past, present, and future and remember the amazing grace and love that is given to us. Here, where we are reminded that Christ delivers us from fear and shame and worry. At the table we hear the voices of those who have gone before us – even Lazarus – and we are challenged to

truly live. We are nourished for a life of faith. We hear again the call “Come forth. Be unbound and set free!”

That is the church to which we belong. “Come forth! Be unbound and live!”

To God be the Glory! Amen.

ⁱ Erma Bombeck, Eat Less Cottage Cheese and More Ice Cream: Thoughts on Life from Erma Bombeck., 2003. Andrews McMeel Publishing, Kansas City.

ⁱⁱ Joy Cowley, Psalms Down Under (Wellington, New Zealand: Catholic Supplies Ltd., 1996), p. 19