



Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush
Text: John 11:28-44

November 3, 2024

Take Away the Stone

When I was in junior high, my Sunday school teacher had a contest for bible verse memorization: one point for every verse memorized; ten points for every psalm. Sitting in the back seat of the car on the way to church, I'd be going over Psalm 117 (2 verses long), I Thessalonians 5:16 (two words) "Rejoice always", and Luke 17:32 (three words) "Remember Lot's wife!" When I got to class, the one verse it seemed everyone had memorized was John 11:35 "Jesus wept." As familiar as that verse is, I don't think we ever truly focus on it. We don't focus on Jesus crying because it is part of a larger scene of grieving at the gravesite of Lazarus. The whole story is a reminder of human frailty and the inevitability of death and frankly neither are themes we like to dwell on. Which is why preachers typically move quickly over the weeping at the tomb to highlight the miraculously resurrection of Lazarus. Pope Leo the Great back in the 5th century said that this passage exists to exemplify the two natures of Jesus Christ: In his humanity Jesus wept for Lazarus; in his divinity Christ raised him from the dead. But on this All Saints' Day, this annual remembrance of the cloud of witnesses who surround us and the loved ones who have died in the past year, it is right to pause at Lazarus' tomb for a moment and not rush to the story's dénouement.

Martha, Mary and Lazarus lived in Bethany, not far from Jerusalem. Their home was a place of hospitality whenever Jesus passed through the region. In John 10, there is a description of Jesus being in Jerusalem when things took an ugly turn. He was accused of blasphemy for daring to suggest that he and God the Father were one. The mob wanted to stone him, but Jesus escaped and left the region. It was while he was away that news reached him that Lazarus was dying. Although it was risky to return to that region, Jesus went to Bethany and met up with Martha and Mary in the cemetery where Lazarus had just been buried. It is there in the graveyard, surrounded by grieving acquaintances and friends, that Jesus wept and where the first simple truth of this passage is revealed.

When someone dies, we all struggle with knowing what to say. We worry about saying something trite about how they lived a full life, or something theologically wrong about how God needed another angel. What's interesting in this passage is that Jesus never initiated a word to the grieving sisters. He listened and only spoke in order to reply to what they said. In these moments, and honestly in our modern experiences of death, what matters most is presence over platitudes. Being there is what is needed the most. So bring a card, drop off some pumpkin bread or a small plant. But choose to be present as an act of normal compassion in those moments when normalcy seems so hard to come by.

Along with being present for Martha and Mary, Jesus' greatest gift was his tears. It gave permission for the sisters to weep as well. It also gave the group gathered in the cemetery permission to mourn. For as Thomas Lynch, a wonderful poet and practicing undertaker has said, "The only way out of grief is through it." So a lot is packed in that short little verse of John 11:35 - "Jesus wept."

By focusing a bit on the grief at the graveside, we are able to appreciate how disturbing and dramatic was the very next thing that happened. Jesus approached Lazarus' tomb, a cave sealed with a great rock, and said "Take away the stone." Imagine the horror that swept through the crowd at this unsettling request. Jesus was asking to disturb a freshly-sealed grave, to expose a corpse to the elements again. Martha tensed up and whispered, "No, Lord, there will be a stench; he's been dead for four days. It would be unpleasant and painful to see him again and remember that his life is truly over. Please, Lord, keep the stone where it is."

Gracia Grindal is a retired professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul; she once said, "Sometimes people fear resurrection more than they fear death." That's a hard, but important truth. She went on to say, "Finality has a certain comfort; at least we know what to do. But resurrection change will [always] be frightening to those intent on being their own lord." If we're honest with ourselves, we often fear resurrection. We stand beside Martha and object when Jesus strides into our midst, points at all that we'd prefer be kept buried and says, "Take away the stone."

Remember, the miracles Jesus did were always about more than just the immediate situation; in this case, it was about more than just the reality of Lazarus lying inside a tomb. We all know how to live with secrets hidden behind stones; with griefs and lost hopes and former dreams hidden behind stones; with broken family relationships or memories of abuse or secret addictions or repressed anger all buried and hidden behind stones. There is a cold comfort in the finality that says such things are over and done with, dead and buried so they'll never be seen in the light of day again. That's what we tell ourselves. But as we all know, that which we bury away is never truly gone. And that's why we often fear resurrection so much.

This miracle in John's gospel isn't about one man being brought back to life. Jesus had revived people before: the son of the widow of Nain, the daughter of Jairus, the synagogue leader. This miracle was part of the larger ministry of Christ who told Martha directly, "I am the resurrection and the life; those who believe in me, even though they die, will live." It was meant as a visible reinforcement of Jesus' prayer, when he looked up and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me...I said this for the sake of the crowd that they may believe that you sent me." The miracle wasn't about restoring one man to life, but to bring an entire family back to life and so an entire community could be restored to life and hope and faith. Jesus stood in their midst saying: "I am the resurrection and the life. Stand by me. Trust in me, in my love, power and grace. Now

remove the stones so my light can shine into your darkened tombs of death, anger, and brokenness. Whatever ugliness resides within cannot be healed until it comes to the light, until its stench is blown away by my spirit, my breath. Trust in me and you'll see the glory of God overcoming whatever you've kept buried in your tombs. Take away the stone."

On that day, the people heard and believed. They removed the stone and Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb. All that they had believed to be inevitable in their world was transformed in that moment as Lazarus emerged wrapped in burial cloths. And what did Jesus do next? He did what he always does. He looks to us to be his love, his mercy, his living hope. "Unbind him and let him go." What must it be like to unwrap cloths and welcome a loved one back to life? To peel back bandages and see healed flesh? To remove blinders and see eyes that return your gaze? To hold hands again in love after they'd been pulled out of our grasp in anger or resentment? What is it like to embrace again after our arms have been left empty through distrust or disappointment? God knows how wonderful that is, so God doesn't reserve such experiences for God alone. We are given the opportunity to unbind, to reconnect, to witness new life through God's amazing grace.

That's what the cloud of witnesses is - the voices and memories and sustaining love that remind us the movement from death to life is a daily event. It is something that builds on what we've learned from those who have gone before us and propels us forward so that our work may not be in vain. Scores of stones still wait to be moved. Scores of burial cloths long to be removed by us, to set people free, to move this community from hurting to healing, to step from shadows to salvation.

Jesus still weeps. Jesus still shouts. Jesus still calls us to action. Jesus does what he does, giving thanks to God, so that we might believe this day and have trust even to the end of time. For as we unbind others, we are unbound ourselves. As Christ said, take away the stones and be at peace. AMEN.