

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 22, 2023
John 11:1-45
"Unbound for Grace"

Now that baseball season is upon us, I'm reminded of a cute story of a little boy who asked his father to watch him practice batting at home. Tommy grabbed a bat and ball and proceeded to take some practice swings, while his father looked on. Then he tossed the ball up in the air and swung, but missed. "Strike one!" said Tommy. A second time he tossed the ball in the air and swung and missed. "Strike two!" he said. A third time he swung and missed. "Strike Three!" said Tommy. Just as his Dad was about to offer some advice, Tommy's face beamed as he said, "Man, am I a great pitcher!"

Now, that is optimism. Tommy converted defeat into victory just by a change in perspective. Which is really what our Christian faith is all about – transforming defeat into victory; loss into gain; rejection into acceptance; exclusion into inclusion; weakness into strength and despair into hope.

The gospel of Christ gives us a fresh way of looking at life. The world tells us that first we live, and then we die. The gospel says that first we must die in order to live. The world tells us that the rule of life is, "survival of the fittest," but the gospel affirms that only those who love are fit for survival. The world tells us to "grab all we can," but the gospel urges us to give all we can. The world's view leads to fatalism. The gospel's perspective leads to the resurrection into life.

When Jesus raised Lazarus from death, he was reminding us there is no sequence in our individual or collective lives that is absolutely unchangeable or irreversible. To those who are caught in what seems like an endless cycle of sin and guilt - Jesus says the cycle can be broken. To those who feel wounded and lost - Jesus says there is restoration. To those trapped in cycles of addiction and misery - Jesus says that there is liberation and freedom. That is the gospel perspective of resurrection into life.

When Jesus learned of the illness of his dear friend, Lazarus, he was about two days journey from Bethany, in Judea. Instead of dropping everything, Jesus waited two days to start for the village. Jesus had such a profound faith in the power of God that he knew that he had no need to be hasty in his actions.

The scene in which Lazarus is resurrected from death bears a remarkable resemblance to the Easter morning resurrection of Jesus. So much so that the women disciples who

were the first witnesses at Jesus' tomb must have had an eerie sense of "deja vu" on Easter morning. There was a tomb and a large stone covering the entrance, just like Easter. The people were weeping because Lazarus had died, just like the women at the tomb on Easter. But Martha wasn't so sure about having the stone rolled away. The King James Version has Martha, the ever-practical-one, say, "Lord, by this time he stinketh."

Jesus sent a prayer heavenward to show how completely God was in control and shouted, literally loud enough to raise the dead, "Lazarus, come out!" To everyone's amazement, he did. Not even being dead four days was a hindrance to Jesus' authority to bring the dead to life. Lazarus walked out of his tomb, with his hands and feet still bound with cloth strips. This was a demonstration of God's power to bring to life that which was dead, both physically and spiritually.

As Christians, we do not believe in the immortality of the soul. We believe in the resurrection of the soul. There is a huge difference. The immortality of the soul suggests that life after death is as natural a function as digestion after a meal. The Bible instead speaks of resurrection, which is entirely unnatural. We do not go on living beyond the grave. Rather, we go to our grave as dead as a doornail and are resurrected, given life back again by God just as we were given it by God in the first place.

What is raised to new life is our whole self, who we are essentially within ourselves - our character, our personality, and our most enduring qualities. That's what the early church meant by "body," when it spoke of belief in the "resurrection of the body," in The Apostles' Creed. In the resurrection, God interrupts the natural sequence of life, saying to us, "I love you and yearn for your love. I have shown you my love by giving my Son, my only Son, to die in your place. He rose from the dead to break the power of death over you."

Lazarus was given a second chance to live with a heightened awareness of the grace of God. He was not made immortal by this miracle, he was made alive. Jesus revealed resurrection power not only for the hereafter, but also for the here-and-now. Lazarus was resurrected into life.

Eventually he would be resurrected into eternal life. But for now, he was raised to new life in the present. That's what Jesus offers us, as well - the opportunity to live before we die. There are far too many people who die before they live; who spend their lives simply existing rather than discovering the fuller, abundant life Jesus Christ offers through the power of the resurrection in the here-and-now.

There's a story told of a little girl who went with her mother to the store. Her mother thought she was ready to buy a few things on her own, so gave her specific instructions on what to get. However, after about 15 minutes, the mother began to get worried. Then her daughter turned up empty handed. "Where have you been?" scolded the mother. "I'm

sorry, Mommy. I know I am late, but Janey broke her doll and I had to stop and help her fix it.” “And how could you help her fix a broken doll?” “I really couldn't, so I sat down with her and helped her cry.”

On our own, the most that we can do for one another is to sit down and help each other cry over broken dolls, broken promises and broken dreams. But the good news is that we are not on our own. Jesus does weep with us just as he wept with Martha and Mary and their friends over the death of Lazarus.

But more than that, Jesus offers the power of the resurrection into life in the here-and-now. Lazarus came out of the cave bound hand and foot, to which Jesus commanded his followers, “Unbind him and let him go.”

There is more to this unbinding than simply unwrapping his bandages. Once he had been revived by the power of Jesus, he still had to be unbound from those things that held him back in life. Jesus brought Lazarus back to life, but it was up to his disciples to set Lazarus free.

This, in fact, is a good characterization of the responsibility of the church today. Only Jesus has the power to bring people back from death to life, but we have the responsibility of unbinding folks from whatever holds them back, ties them up, or restricts them from entering into the fulfilling life Jesus promises.

Whatever has died in your life, Jesus has the power to revive. If you are grieving over the loss of purpose, love, health, trust, security, or freedom in your life, Jesus calls to you just as he did to Lazarus, saying, “Come out! Come out of the dark tomb of death into the bright creation of life!” And then, Jesus turns to us who claim to follow him and tells us, “Unbind them and let them go!” Unbinding is equipping, nurturing, training, educating, visiting, praying, listening, helping, serving, giving, caring, and supporting.

As a church of Jesus Christ, our ministry to those who are revived by Jesus Christ is a ministry of freedom - freeing people from whatever ties them up in knots - disease, poverty, imprisonment, financial uncertainty, grief, addiction, violence, or prejudice. Our job is to find the knots and untie them. It's what the church has been doing for centuries. Providence Presbyterian Church been unbinding people for grace for more than 20 years. We have been striving to welcome, love and serve all people because of the grace we have received and for the grace Jesus offers.

Every day, Jesus says to folks whose spirits are dying, “Come out!” Across the centuries, Jesus commands us, “Unbind them, and let them go!” Some time in our past or maybe several sometimes, faithful members of this or some other church removed our bindings for grace. Now, it is our turn to unbind others. Together, may we be unbound for grace. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being where you are. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen