

April 2, 2017 5th Sunday of Lent

Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-45

Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope, Minneapolis

Terrible. Thanks for Asking. <https://www.apmpodcasts.org/ttfa/>

Grace and peace to you, beloved in Christ, from our God who is the resurrection and the life. Amen

I try to pop into the Sunday Forum whenever I am able to make it—last week’s forum was exceptional. The title was something like “How shall I die?” and it was a panel discussion.

I know this sounds like a set up for a joke, doesn’t it: So, a chaplain, a nurse and two physicians—one from the clinic perspective, one from the internal medicine, hospital perspective—walk into.... a bar...

But truly that foursome, from their unique vantage points, made up the panel and they talked about health directives—living wills, we sometimes call them.

?Who makes decisions for you if you can’t make decisions for yourself?

?How have you shared your values, your spiritual beliefs, with these decision makers...so they can do their best to honor your wishes?

?Have you had that conversation with your spouse, your parents, your adult children, a close friend?

?Have you written it down so it becomes part of the medical record and then have you made some copies and distributed them so the important people are on the same page?

And what about those questions: If you could likely survive, what would you want done?

?If you really couldn’t survive and weren’t likely to regain the quality of life that you currently experience, then what would you want done? ?What would you NOT want done?

So many questions and this panel parsed them in an honest and informed way.

They spoke clearly from their medical experience—their knowledge and what they’d witnessed.

Medicine has taken us so far over the years—so much *can* be done, but it doesn’t mean we must do it.

Layered with all of this, they spoke wisely from their spiritual grounding, never ever denying the grief, and at once stewarding the gift of life and the sacred process of death.

At one point they asked for a show of hands, who had written health directives?

I was remembering the first time Jane and I wrote ours—we were probably in our very early 30s—it seemed young to think of death, and yet I’d been working as a chaplain at HCMC and had been around for many, many deaths.

Before the years of legal marriage for gay couples, these health directives and other legal papers were the best chance we’d have to bind our lives and decisions—so we tread into these grown up-feeling waters.

Most of us drag our feet into conversations about things like death—it’s not light or easy.

But from my experience, once we get into the conversation, there is an honesty, sometimes even a freedom we find in daring to speak openly about what matters most.

I give thanks to last week's Sunday Forum panel leaders—Alden, Marty, Bill, and Paul.

Who would have known they'd set us up so well for Ezekiel's vision of dry bones and John's telling of the story of Jesus and Lazarus, and his sisters Mary and Martha that we hear this 5th Sunday in Lent. Our theme still is Confessing what blocks our way to God...

And our focus today on how death can block our way to God.

Let's be careful how we say this:

On the one hand, death isn't what blocks our way, some would even say it opens our way, for with death we are with God.

So then, it's the fear, the desire to deny death, to avoid this natural, sacred cycle—that can block our way to God.

On the other hand, there is some truth that death sure seems to block our way.

On this side of the grave, it appears so extreme, so final—we wonder what happens to our bodies? To our souls? To those relationships that mean the most to us?

In a beautiful Lenten-spiritual-practice-kind-of-way, I heard the leaders last week inviting us to face the inevitability of our own death and the death of our loved ones from a place of faith, a place of intention.

Hold onto all of this as we look at today's gospel.

This is literally the hinge story in John, the very center, as Jesus ministry in the beginning of John was all about public signs and healing and miracles, and now, with this story he's beginning to shift toward the cross and a more private conversation with his disciples.

Today let me offer two just points, Good News, both of them: 1. Jesus meets us where we. 2. An invitation.

First, Jesus meets us where we are.

Lazarus has fallen ill, his sisters have sent word to Jesus who dilly dallies long enough that Lazarus dies, and finally Jesus is approaching their house.

It's Martha who doesn't wait for him to get there, she's out in the road.

I'd assume this isn't a quiet conversation but rather some all out yelling, "Why did you take so long, Jesus?"

If you'd been here, he wouldn't have died."

Martha pushes back. She's angry. She's sad. She talks it out. She yells. She cries.

And finally she confesses Jesus as the Messiah and you can almost hear her deep sigh.

Mary's grief is different than Martha's, it's quieter.

She's stayed in the house and finally goes out to talk with Jesus, to cry with Jesus.

She too tells him, "If you'd been here, Jesus..." and I can't help but wonder if he'd do it differently next time.

Regardless, Jesus meets them with this deep compassion, this depth of grief, this sense of solidarity.

Jesus says I am the resurrection and the life: even in the midst of so much suffering, suffering that is all around us, Jesus is still able to make life.

That's the power of *this* gospel, really the power of *THE* gospel:

that this life in Christ isn't easy, it's not supposed to be easy, but that Jesus meets us in our pain with our messy emotions, and he's all about life, abundant life, all that we need for now.

The last few weeks I've been listening to Nora McNery's podcast called "Terrible, Thanks for Asking." McNery lives in northeast Minneapolis and over the course of a few weeks she miscarried her second child, lost her father, and buried her husband after a long decline with a brain tumor.

With a reference to that title, **Terrible, Thanks for Asking**, Nora McNery explains the podcast this way:

"You know how every day someone asks 'how are you?' and even if you're totally dying inside, you just say 'fine,' so everyone can go about their day?" she asks. "This show is just the opposite."

She's honest, gut wrenchingly honest, and real.

The gift of today's gospel is the way Jesus holds our emotions, especially emotion about grief: he meets us with our emotion, with whatever that is, however that comes out, he meets us there.

Finally, an invitation, I love the line we often miss in this story.

At the entrance to the cold, smelly tomb, Jesus prays and then calls, "Lazarus, come out."

We read that Lazarus came out, still bound up in the strips of grave cloth.

Jesus tells the crowd, the neighbors, the family, the people gathered around, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Jesus could have done the unwrapping, instead he calls on the community, "Unbind him, and let him go."

And in your mind's eye you can imagine them so physically unwinding the long strips of cloth.

That's our job. To be about unbinding people, freeing them, cutting them loose.

If you've ever been the one bound up, by sin or fear or situation—and I've been in those shoes—it is powerful, life changing, life affirming to be unbound: Our job is to unbind people, to let them go free.

Each Wednesday in Lent we've been enjoying a soup lunch after a small service.

The group varies week to week but the stalwarts are some of our elders, many in their 80s, and then a smattering of others and a university student or two.

This week we widened the lunch and moved it to the Fellowship Hall so that it could include the staff and students of PEASE Academy, the recovery high school that shares our facility—has for 28 or so years!

With a little success students and staff had spread out to to different tables, our elders joined in, the church staff, other church folks, we all got mixed up and crossed the barriers and learned some more names. It's small, I realize, and yet it felt huge, and freeing, crossing our usual lines—church and school, younger and older, recovering, in sanctuary.

And how are you wrapped up tightly in the grave cloths of fear or death or sin, and in need of unbinding?

How will you be about unbinding someone this week?

I pray that these conversations about death are a way that we unbind one another, freeing each other to life.

Just two points today:

Jesus meets us where we are, messy emotions, grief and all.

And that invitation, to be about unbinding people, letting them go free.

In these day, may Jesus lead us to the cross.

And may Jesus meet us in our places of death with resurrection. With life! Amen.