

March 26, 2023 5th Sunday of Lent
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

(Ezekiel 37:1-14), Psalm 130
John 11:1-45

Grace, grace and peace to you, beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen.

A few weeks back, I was visiting a couple from our congregation—elders, folks I know well.

We were sitting in the living room.

We'd talked about a number of things: how they are spending their days, family and health,
the world, the church.

I said something like, is there anything else that you want to talk about today? Anything else on your mind?

The one who'd been quieter in our conversation said quickly, and with tremendous clarity, Death.

I want to talk about death.

And so we did: funeral planning, death and dying, death and life, how they are feeling about it.

Then came my birthday, and a text from our former minister of Worship and Music, Zach.

Happy Birthday, etc, etc., and then (and I quote): "I leave you with a message I keep close from a sermon
you once preached: remember that you are going to die."

Now some people might have another response to a text like that, but honestly, it made me smile:

1. Zach listened to the sermon and remembered it, and
2. He's right, we are going to die, and I find it refreshing when we can talk straight about these things,
for if we can talk about dying, we can also talk about living.

Dear friends, as we approach today's long story of Lazarus and his sisters, death and life are before us.

Lazarus' death and life, but also Jesus' death and life, and all the emotions that comes with it.

This gospel reading is pivotal: the stakes couldn't be higher...and Jesus knows it.

In John's gospel it's *this* story of Jesus raising Lazarus back to life, that triggers Jesus' death, his crucifixion.

We are at the hinge, a turning point, and now moving quickly toward Jesus' death.

This gospel is a bounty—many directions to go:

We could muse about Jesus' tears. Jesus wept, it says.

Tears for his friend Lazarus, surely, but I'd imagine also tears for Mary and Martha, tears for himself and
all he's facing, maybe tears that he can't take death away, perhaps tears of anger.

We could try to understand this story from Lazarus' experience—what did it feel like?

What does it mean to be resurrected and then still know you will die again?

We could dig into Jesus words, like Resurrection and Life.

These are challenging for our scientific minds, and yet, Jesus gives resurrection to Lazarus,

and also life, life abundant, life now.

We could wonder at pain that is “all for the glory of God.” Really, God, is that how you work?

We could explore a theory that Martha wasn't in the original versions of this story, rather only Mary.

I could explain how some scholars are finding that many of the earliest papyrus copies of John have

Lazarus and his one sister, Mary, and then how words in Greek get scratched out and changed, the name of Martha being added, the verbs adjusted to plural.

We could consider what this might mean,

why they might have made this shift,

and what it could say about women in that early community of Jesus followers.

But that's a sermon or two, or a study, of its own, and

I will include a link with more information in this week's email.

If any of these catch you, spend some more time with this gospel story this week—it's an important one.

Instead this morning let me offer simply two points, Good News, both of them:

1. Jesus meets us where we. And,
2. An invitation from Jesus.

First, Jesus meets us where we are.

Lazarus has become ill, his sisters have sent word to Jesus who dilly dallies long enough that Lazarus dies.

Finally, days later, Jesus finally is approaching their house.

It's Martha who can scarcely wait for Jesus to get there, she's out in the road.

I'd assume this isn't a quiet conversation but, likely 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.

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...”

Don't you wonder if Jesus would do things differently if there was another chance? I wonder.

Regardless, Jesus meets Martha and Mary **on their own terms.**

He meets them with this well of compassion, this depth of grief, this sense of solidarity.

I wonder if we make enough space for Jesus to meet us with this much emotion?

Secondly, an invitation, and “invitation” is probably not strong enough. See what you think.

At the entrance to the cold, stinky tomb, Jesus prays and then calls: “Lazarus, come out.”

I find this image so curious: how could Lazarus walk still bound up in the strips of grave clothes?

What had happened to his physical body during those four days?

Jesus tells the crowd, the neighbors, the family, the gawkers, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

You see, I want to call this an invitation,

but depending on the tone of voice, it’s more of a command.

Jesus could have done the unwrapping himself, but instead he calls on the community,

“Unbind him, and let him go.”

In your mind’s eye you can imagine them physically unwrapping the strips of smelly cloth.

That’s our job, my friends:

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, then, is to unbind people, to let them go free.

How are you bound up? Trapped in the vestiges death? Systems of prejudice? Elements of identity that no longer fit?

And how can you be part of unbinding others? Will you accept this invitation?

Death and life, my friends, death and life.

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

And that invitation, to be about unbinding, letting people go free: that invitation is for us.

A week ago today, in the early morning hours, Wayne Westwood slipped from this life to life eternal.

He was 94 years old and a long-time member of University Lutheran Church of Hope.

Yesterday, many gathered here in this space for a funeral service for Wayne.

Like we do each time a member of this congregation dies,

this morning let us take a moment to share a little about Wayne, and then we’ll pray.

Wayne was born in South Dakota and grew up in Northfield, the youngest of four siblings.

As a young man, Wayne moved to Minneapolis for work and found his way to the Hope Church Choir.

The choir was THE place to meet people, and eventually (after many years, I’m told)

Sweet Wayne gathered the courage to ask another choir member, Anna Johnson, on a date.

Anna and Wayne married in 1957.

Together they had three children: Tom, Jim, and Karen.

Anna died 20 years ago.

Wayne spent his working years as a civil servant at the Veterans Administration at Fort Snelling.

He went back to school to complete a law degree when the kids were still at home.

His work at the VA focused on insurance and benefits.

Wayne loved to bake bread—spending a life-time practicing the art of baking French Loaves.

He enjoyed golf and tennis, chess and cribbage, and loved classical music and opera.

As a family and couple, they enjoyed travel and camping, exploring the world.

Here at church Wayne served meals at Loaves and Fishes, collated the newsletter,
and, at 94 years old said YES to being a confirmation mentor.

For around 30 years, Wayne recorded worship services nearly every Sunday on cassette tapes, then CDs.

He had a great view from his spot up at the sound board in the far corner of the balcony.

Wayne was known as Boppa to his family.

He had five grandkids and one great-grandchild,

with connections to Hope that run deep in the Westwood, Pignatello and Becerra families.

When members of this congregation die,

we remember how the waters that first washed over them in baptism, hold them now in death.

We pray at the baptismal waters, linking ourselves to God's powerful waters of promise.

Holy God, holy and powerful, we remember before you today our brother Wayne Westwood. We thank you for giving him to us to know and to love as a companion in our pilgrimage on earth. At the waters of baptism, you welcomed him into your love. At these waters, you comforted him in times of trouble and encouraged him in delight. At these waters, you now enfold him into Jesus' death and resurrection and the promise of life everlasting. Console us who mourn and bring us together to feast with all the saints of God. In Jesus' mercy we pray. Amen.