

Lazarus, Come Out!

In general, we are not a people who like to wait. In our technology based lives near immediate gratification is actually possible for many things.

I think we like waiting even less when we have called someone to come and help us. The plumbing is stopped up, the internet is down, and in these times waiting is a very frustrating experience.

These are not even matters of life and death so multiply the frustration, add some desperation, and we might begin to understand how Mary and Martha felt.

They had called for Jesus. He was down near the Jordan where John had been baptizing. Close enough to get to Bethany. Really close, especially if your dear friend is dying! But oddly, Jesus doesn't seem too concerned. He sees a far bigger perspective than everyone else who is in a panic that Jesus hasn't arrived. Then suddenly, all too suddenly it is too late. Lazarus is dead. All human hope is now pointless. It is too late. Have you ever been there? I have. When it feels too late to fix, too late to call out, too late even to hope. It's just too late.

Jesus knows that Lazarus is dead. He tells his disciples this brutal truth. Only then does he decide to go to nearby Bethany. He arrives on the fourth day. The day that is beyond all hope. All through Scripture the third day is the day that God acts. But, Jesus arrives on the hopeless day, the fourth.

He bears the anger of Martha, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died!" Am I the only one who actually hears Martha saying, "Where the hell were you?"

And then Jesus himself weeps at his dead friends tomb...

But then, something so unexpected that it defies belief unfolds. In the midst of deep grief and despair Jesus calls forth life and liberation from the hopeless hole. He does this on the hopeless day, amidst a hopeless crowd. He calls forth life from a dark hole certain to be filled putrefied and stinking death.¹

I don't know about you, but the story of Lazarus is one with which I struggle—it even makes me a little nervous every time it comes around in the Lectionary.

Year after year I look at it and the deep mystery of this event continues to cloud my mind and I think, "What in the world can I do with this that isn't too sentimental or just feeds into that kind of religious magical thinking that robs it of it's meaning. So usually I preach on the Dry Bones and avoid it altogether!!! But since I decided I had to face this down, one thought, one simple truth kept coming to me. As I listened again and again to Mary and Martha I felt for them because I know what it is to feel hopeless. I think we all know that special quality of misery that is a combination of hopelessness and frustration—that what if, what if, what if refrain that tap dances over our hearts and minds, crushing them little by little.

Those timers of waiting and waiting, times of praying and praying. Those excruciating times of willing and willing something hopeful to happen.

And then somewhere just after the third day we have given up. We have resigned ourselves. We have resented. It is finished, we say. It's too late!

¹ With thanks to Peter Woods

In the dark of failed relationships, failed expectations of happiness, failed dreams for beauty and happy endings. In the entombed hopeless reality of life's darkness, we have heard an unexpected voice, a voice that called our name.

Just like Lazarus, life and liberation comes to us through the tears of Jesus and the torment of our hopelessness. We are able to stand up, against all the odds and understand the meaning of Lazarus' name. It means, "God has helped" No one else could have helped, but God has helped. On that fourth hateful and hopeless day, God has helped. We sit dead and spiritually rotting and then Jesus cries with a loud voice, and says, "Stephanie, come out! Tom, come out, Jason, come out, Mark, come out!"

As Steve Blank writes, Jesus comes to us and says, "Come out, you who have been entombed in silence, in fear, in misery, come out! Come out to the one who loves you.

You who are afraid for your life, who are afraid OF your life, you who are ashamed, you who have been bound, come out into your own life!

You who have been told you're unworthy, you who are afraid of failing, come out into your whole life.

You who are wounded and grieving, who are hopeless or depressed, you who wonder if you'll ever live deeply, come out into life's fullness.

You who are well defended in your fortresses, in armor, in the costumes you wear for the world, come out.

You who are ostracized, oppressed and abused, the gifted and doubtful, and all others, you can come out.

Come out of your tombs, out of hiding; come out of exile, out of the wilderness.

And you who have rolled the great stones over other people's lives, you who in your fear kill the hopes of others, roll them back. Stand aside. Never mind the stench.

Call to the ones you fear. Open your arms.

*In the end, the truth of the matter is this: All of us have a place in this life, and the tomb is not it. The One Who Weeps for us calls to us and tells us we are all wanted.

We are all mourned by the one whose name is LOVE. Come out. Unbind yourselves. Not even the fourth day can defeat God's love for us. Your wait is over. Let the love of God set you free. Amen.