

## Unbind Him!

By: Meagan McLaughlin

November 3, 2024. On this All Saints' Day, Pastor Meagan preaches on our gospel reading from John about Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life. We are reminded that Jesus wept, that grief is holy, and that death will never be the final word.

Readings: [Isaiah 25:6-9](#), [Revelation 21:1-6a](#), [John 11:32-44](#)

\*\*\* Transcript \*\*\*

Several years ago I sat with a couple whose young adult son had died after many years of severe mental illness. As we discussed what scriptures they would like to have for the funeral service, they said, "We want to have lament. We are Christian and we know he's with God, but there will be a lot of people there who don't believe, and they don't know that. We don't need the lament, but they do." Lament, they felt, is for those who don't believe. Jesus, I imagine, might disagree with that.

Today, as we remember our beloved who have died, our readings say a lot about grief. Isaiah describes the shroud that covers the people. In Revelation, John shares a vision of tears wept out of grief.

And the Gospel of John brings us one of many profound stories of grief that can be found in our scriptures. Martha meets Jesus when he arrives at Bethany, and the first words out of her mouth are words of longing, and blame, born of deep sadness. "If you had been here, Jesus, my brother would not have died." Mary, coming out a few minutes later, says the same words. And the people gathered there echo this as well. "Couldn't the one who gave the blind man sight have saved Lazarus too?" And I imagine that just maybe, Jesus had a few "if onlys" of his own. After all, in the verses just before our passage today, Jesus was told Lazarus was sick, and he delayed two days before going to Bethany. If only you have been here, Jesus. I've heard similar words from children, spouses, siblings, and parents: if only I hadn't left the hospital, if only I had gone with them, if only I hadn't said what I did, if only we had tried harder, if only... our loved ones would still be alive.

And in our story today there are tears. Not just Mary and Martha, but their whole community, weeping for Lazarus. And when Jesus goes to the place where Lazarus was laid, there's the stone. Not a little rock, but an enormous stone, so large it requires several strong people to move it away. There is coldness, hardness, weight, permanence in that image. It's no wonder Martha objects when Jesus asks to have the stone removed. The size of the stone alone is daunting, and then there is, as Martha warns Jesus, the stench. And finally, the shroud — strips of cloth, binding Lazarus's hands and feet, according to the tradition of burials at that time and place. Blame. Tears. Stone. Stench. Shroud. Lazarus is dead.

Nothing about this situation seems to lend itself to hope, and Jesus doesn't shy away from that. He sees the tears of the community, and he hears Mary's grief, and he is greatly disturbed and deeply moved. And then, Jesus wept. The Greek word for Jesus' weeping carries a sense not just

of a tear or two coming from the corner of an eye, but of a deep, wrenching, burst of tears. With those words, those of us who have lost a loved one, or perhaps remembering them on All Saints' Day for the first time this morning, know that Jesus understands. In Christ, we who are grieving today know we are not alone. Jesus wept. And a whisper of hope is born.

Lazarus's tomb is not the only place Jesus wept. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus stood looking over Jerusalem and wept, saying, "If only you had recognized the things that made for peace. If only you had recognized the presence of God." As we finally reach election week, no matter what our views on politics and policies, we long for relief from the wondering and waiting. There is so much hatred and division, deceit and violence, so much at stake. It's exhausting and even frightening, and it's not hard to imagine Jesus saying these words over our country in this time. Jesus wept. And just as those gathered around Lazarus's tomb felt when Jesus asked to roll back the stone, it can be challenging to see anything in this situation that can lend itself to hope. And Jesus doesn't shy away from that.

Lazarus was dead, and we gathered today are remembering beloved people in our lives who have died. Jerusalem was broken, and as we watch what's happening in the world today, we know there is so much brokenness there, too. But, we are not done with this story. That whisper of hope from over 2000 years ago hasn't died out yet.

We are not alone. Jesus doesn't shy away from death, or our brokenness and our grief. Jesus went to Bethany out of love for his friends, and though he knew the grief was there, he went. He felt the grief himself, in his soul. Jesus went to Bethany in spite of the disciples' warnings that Jesus's life would be at risk — they reminded Jesus, people had tried to kill him in that region before. The disciples chose to go with him to Bethany, knowing the risk. And indeed, when the story of Lazarus coming back to life had spread, John tells us this was the moment when the leaders decided definitively that Jesus had to die. Knowing all this, Jesus went to Bethany, facing the blame, the longing, and all that he found there.

Jesus felt his friends' grief, he wept his own tears. Hope whispered. Jesus walked closer, to the tomb. He saw the stone, so cold, so heavy, solid and permanent, and he asked to have it rolled away. Hope spoke. Jesus commanded Lazarus, "Come out!" Hope shouted. And at Jesus' words, Lazarus came back to life, and the stench blew away in the fresh air as Lazarus left the tomb. Lazarus was dead, and at Jesus' bidding, is alive. Death is never the final word. Hope roared.

But there is one more thing left to do, when Lazarus, alive, walks out of the tomb. Lazarus's feet and hands and body and head are still bound by the shroud he had been buried in. And Jesus speaks again, to the people who are gathered there: "Unbind him." You thought death was permanent, Jesus was say, but it is not. You thought there was too much brokenness, no possibility of hope for our loved ones or for ourselves or our communities. But hope roars. Lazarus is alive. Unbind him.

We, along with the disciples and Lazarus's community, hear this call today. We are called to the center of brokenness, pain, and longing in our communities. We are called to the center of our own grief as we remember our loved ones who have died. We too are called to Bethany.

We take the risk, we face the fear, and we go to Bethany — and we witness the miracle. As we grieve today for our beloveds who have died, Isaiah tells of God's promise to swallow death up, remove the shroud, and wipe tears from our eyes. As we see the turmoil and violence in our world, Revelation today tells us of a new heaven and a new earth that are coming where the old one is passing away. The God who removes the shroud in Isaiah and wipes the tears away in Revelation is the same God who wept at the loss of his friend. The same one who asked that stone to be moved from the tomb. Perhaps Jesus even helped to push it away. The same one who smelled the stench when the tomb was first opened. In Christ, we are not alone.

We are called to Bethany, in our own day, to face together brokenness, pain, death, and grief, as risky as it might be. Jesus didn't shy away, and as we travel with him to Bethany, hope roars, and we will see what Jesus promised Martha and Mary. In Christ, life emerges, not in spite of death, but out of death itself. And we, beloveds, hear Jesus' invitation: unbind them. Unravel the lies and the fear that hold us and others hostage. Roll away the barriers that keep us from seeing and loving one another. Unwrap the life and the beauty that is so bound so that the whisper of hope can touch it. Remind one another that Jesus wept, that grief is holy, and that death will never be the final word.

Today, we stand together at Bethany. We remember with joy and with grief those who have died, knowing that Jesus weeps with us. We hear that whisper of hope, and we know the promise that life is emerging out of the death we face today. We hear Jesus saying to us, unbind them, and hope roars.

Thanks be to God.

\*\*\* Keywords \*\*\*

2024, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Pastor Meagan McLaughlin, Isaiah 25:6-9, Revelation 21:1-6a, John 11:32-44