

2008, 3-9 Be unbound from death (Lent 5) John 11:1-53 By Rev. Roger Haugen,
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Turn off the sun. Drain out the sea. Let the moon fall from the sky, because our wife, mother, sister, grandmother and great-grandmother is gone. So begins an obituary in the newspaper. This is the cry of a family suffering the loss of a loved one. This is the cry of Mary and Martha at the loss of a dear brother. This is the cry of Jesus when he hears the news of Lazarus' death. One of the most dramatic verses in the Bible comes in just two words, "Jesus wept." This is the cry of Psalm 130, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord, Hear my voice!" We are bound by this death.

Anyone who has lost a close loved one knows the pain – knows how death reaches up from the grave and seeks to suffocate us. Death seems to be everywhere. We hear of the death of students shot in schools, the disaster of September 11, the death of many in the conflict in the Middle East and in Afghanistan. Death strikes at us as we hear of young people – and old – dying of cancer. Our grip on life seems a little more tenuous with each edition of the newspaper, each nightly news. We are bound by death.

We see ads on television and we think, just maybe, I can cheat the aging process with the right cream, the right gizmo to tie around my waist to keep the muscles from slipping. Death is at work, every day we get one day closer. Some day the grief will be because of our death. We are bound. We cannot set ourselves free. The fear of death can paralyze, we are bound. We can be tempted to avoid all risk, thinking that we can avoid death. It can lead to the avoidance of life for fear of death. A psychologist described the neurotic as one "who refused the loan [of life] in order to avoid the payment of the debt [death]."

Lazarus died, there is no denying it. Those around felt the pain, Jesus included. We know of what they speak. Death takes its toll on everyone. Death

cannot be denied or avoided.

In the midst of grief we cannot understand why Jesus would stay where he was for two more days. He had the power to intervene, to heal Lazarus -- why would he not come? In the midst of the pain we can easily miss what is really going on. Jesus is not bound by death's timetable. Jesus is not bound by death. Jesus said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified." Just as the healing of the blind man was to give God glory, so too the raising of Lazarus. God was not bound by dry bones in the desert, God is not bound by death.

It is in death that God does God's greatest work. It is in facing death that Jesus is triumphant over death. The raising of Lazarus is a prelude, a chance for the people to give glory to God, before Jesus himself faces and conquers death. Death is not something that can destroy. Death does not bind us. Death takes its toll on us but God is triumphant. There is hope only in facing death. We confess in the 23rd Psalm, "even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil." It is the confidence in God that allows Ezekiel to believe that God could act on these dry bones even though he hasn't. It is faith in God that allows the psalmist to cry "Out of the depths" even though God seems far away. It is faith that allows us to rest upon the promises of God in the midst of the pain at the death of a loved one. It is faith that allows us to say with Martha, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world", even though death appears to have won the day. We know we will be unbound to live.

Because of faith in Jesus, rather than fear death, the shortness and uncertainty of life can help us embrace life in all its fullness. For many cancer survivors it is the diagnosis of cancer that helped them to embrace life, and their life takes on new brilliance. If we know that death does not have the final say, we can live life to its fullest, open to God's leading in all of our days, knowing that no matter

what happens, God is with us. God is not bound by death and neither are we.

Central to our faith is the death and resurrection of Jesus. Central, also, is our death and resurrection. We speak of baptism in terms of death, "when we were baptized into Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death." Death to old ways, to old priorities and not without pain. It is in facing death that we are lead to new life. We are unbound, set free. Life takes on a new vitality. We are open to the leading of God no matter where that may lead.

We must die daily to the old death denying, life denying ways because it is tempting to hang on to what we have. It is tempting to deny death, but in doing so we also deny the opportunity of God to work through that death. To avoid death is to avoid the resurrection.

Our world needs people willing to confront death, and discover life. People willing to believe that God is able to act even when life seems as unlikely around us as to a bunch of old bones. The world needs people who have died to themselves and been born to new life.

Episcopal priest Robert Capon said, "We are in a war between dullness and astonishment." The most critical issue facing Christians is not abortion, pornography, disintegration of the family, moral absolutes, MTV, drugs, racism, sexuality or school prayer. The critical issue today is dullness. We have lost our astonishment. The Good News is no longer Good News, it is okay news. Christianity is no longer life changing, it is life enhancing. Jesus doesn't change people into wild-eyed radicals anymore, he changes them into nice people! If Christianity is simply about being nice, I'm not interested.

Life just seems full of long lines at a polling place, waiting to vote for someone we not all that passionate about. Waiting to pick from a number of candidates that may promise good things, but do we really have hope? Are we really fighting for something we believe in?

"What happened to radical Christianity, the un-nice brand of Christianity that turned the world upside-down? What happened to the category-smashing, life-threatening, anti-institutional gospel that spread through the first century like wildfire and was considered (by those in power) dangerous? What happened to the kind of Christians whose hearts were on fire, who had no fear, who spoke the truth no matter what the consequence, who made the world uncomfortable, who were willing to follow Jesus wherever he went? What happened to the kind of Christians who were filled with passion and gratitude, and who every day were unable to get over the grace of God?

"[He says, (Robert Capon)] I'm ready for a Christianity that "ruins" my life, that captures my heart and makes me uncomfortable. I want to be filled with an astonishment, which is so captivating that I am considered wild and unpredictable and, well, dangerous. Yes, I want to be "dangerous" to a dull and boring religion. I want a faith that is considered dangerous by our predictable and monotonous culture."

Isn't this exactly what made those boring Pharisees upset. Jesus was a radical, raising people from the dead. "Wouldn't it be better if one man died instead of stirring up the whole nation," they said. Little did they know they were really going to get both. And Jesus, that radical, faced death and died for you, in order that you might live, live like a radical.

Central to our faith is death and resurrection. To believe in God, to give God the glory as was seen in the raising of Lazarus is to look beyond death to the new life promised by God. This new life begins today and continues into eternity. We are not bound by death.

To live the new life requires that we embrace the pain that comes with the death of what was and trust that God will be with us in the future. Then Jesus' words for Lazarus can also be for us, "Unbind him, let him go!"

