

## SERMON FOR MARCH 26, 2017

Many, many of us have been where we find Mary and Martha. They are wracked by grief for their dead brother, Lazarus. They are inconsolable at the loss of their dear one. They are spinning from one thing to another because death throws into chaos all that we know and count on. Their friends have gathered around them, bringing needed comfort and consolation. But their friends add to the chaos as they try to do the right thing by Mary and Martha. “Are the sisters going to Lazarus’ grave to weep? Should we follow them? Do they need privacy or a circle of compassion? “

Just as with any intrusion of death into life, fear dances with sorrow. Loneliness dances with mystery. Tears sob their way into tender memories. And the shadow of abandonment falls ominously over hopes and dreams. Most of us have been where we find the two sisters from Bethany. Loss is a common human experience, whether it be the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, the loss of our health and independence, the loss of a relationship, the loss of a life style, or the loss of security and comfort. Most of us have been in the shadowy company of death, and we have empathy for Mary and Martha.

Into their grief stricken lives comes their friend, Jesus. Not just the thinker or problem solver Jesus, but also the feeling, passionate Jesus. He does not sidestep the deep grief of his friends. He enters their sorrow and welcomes their tears, their crazy grief-talk that draws him in (we are so glad to see you.) and, at the same time, pushes him away (where have you been? If you had been here,

our brother would not have died.) Jesus lets Mary and Martha feel and he allows himself to feel, as well. Lazarus was Jesus' friend, and he does for his friend what we do for ours. He wept.

Jesus does the Bethany sisters a huge favour by not coming to them with emotional coolness. He does not expect that they will be calm and sanguine. If he did, Mary and Martha would have to hide their heart-wrenching sorrow and play the "I'm ok" game. Their anxious fear would be pushed down into the shadow and we all know that what is hidden in our shadow gets hooked and comes roaring into life at the worst possible moment. In a profound way, Jesus saved the sisters from themselves. They did not have to keep a stiff upper lip or pretend to be stoic. Lazarus' death turned great love into great sorrow and Jesus understood and welcomed that sorrow. Shadow, theirs and his, did not deter him.

Mary and Martha are not the only recipients of Jesus' compassion. We know that Lazarus is transformed by the power of Jesus' healing energy. This story is a little Easter story. It prepares the way for the crucifixion and resurrection narrative that is as close to us now as the town of Bethany is to the big city of Jerusalem.

It is no secret that Lazarus is in his tomb. He has been there for four days. This means that he has been dead for five. The Jewish custom is that funeral rites have to be completed in the day following death. The time references in this story are there to make sure that we realize that Lazarus is truly dead. Actually,

the story makes sure that we know that Lazarus is beyond hope. John's hopeful day is the third day. That is the space between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. If a miracle were in the cards, John's hearers would have expected it on day three. But now that day three is over, there was little expectation of new life. Remember that Mary and Martha lament that if Jesus had only been there, Lazarus would not have died. And the subtext is, "You were not here, Jesus. It is too late."

Well, we know that it is not too late. Jesus approaches Lazarus' grave and orders the stone rolled back. Sound familiar? Then, what creeps out of the grave is the stench of death. If we had any doubts about Lazarus' being truly dead, we give them up in the smell of decay. Jesus does not back away from death's reality. He does not flee from the shadow that has fallen across Lazarus' life. He calls Lazarus from the tomb. Out staggers his friend, still wrapped in his burial cloths. When Jesus sees his friend, he asks the others, "Unbind him and set him free."

In some ways, this Easter story is as strong for me as the story of Jesus' resurrection. Maybe stronger, if that is not too off-beat or challenging. I do understand that the Easter story is our key story, the story of our hope in the holy and in the promise or transformation. In a mystical way, it sums up Jesus' life that was all about making resurrection to abundant life happen for lepers, for prisoners, for sick and sorrowing people, for outcasts, for women, for the

marginalized and the broken. In the end, we see his compassion validated as love proves to be stronger than death.

Easter is about Jesus' liberation from the shadow of death. Lazarus' rising is about us. It is about the power of love to take away the shadow and to draw us into the light. It is not too difficult to open our ears and to hear Jesus call us into love's light. No matter what we have lost or whom we have lost, Jesus says out loud, "Unbind my people and set them free."

Whatever we have stowed away in the depths of our being, whatever resides in our shadow because of shame or regret or inadequacy, whatever lies hidden because it is unacceptable to us or to others is invited into the light where shadow has little power over us. "Unbind my people. Set them free."

Sometimes we slide into hopelessness, as though we were living in the fourth day, past hopefulness, past healing and restoration. Sometimes we see that we have been carrying pain for a long time and it has become a mountain that will not be moved. Sometimes we feel dead inside, where love or self-regard are buried. That is when we remember Lazarus and his astonishing beyond-belief transformation. A little Easter. A personal resurrection. A just-for-him chance to begin again.

If it can happen in Bethany, it can happen in Waterloo. We are invited by love out of the shadow and into the light. Unbind my people. Set them free.