

April 2, 2017

Tim Hughes Williams

Sermon: "Lazarus, Come Out!"

First New Testament Lesson (Liturgist): John 11:1-29

11Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹²The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last

day.”²⁵Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” ²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.

Second New Testament Lesson (Preacher): John 11:30-45

³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there.³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”³⁷But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” ³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Sermon: Lazarus, Come Out!

It gives me no pleasure to tell you this, but it is a historical fact. Once upon a time, at the tender age of eighteen years old, I joined a fraternity. Sigma Phi Epsilon, to be specific. I could still give you the secret handshake, fifteen years later – but I won't, because it's, you know, a secret.

I think it's abundantly clear at this point that I'm not really fraternity material but maybe that was a little less obvious in 1998 with my swooping bangs and seashell necklaces and deep desire to have friends. So I rushed Sigma Phi Epsilon and to my amazement and my parents' dismay, I received a bid.

On the first day of pledging season, I reported to the fraternity house in my button-down shirt and tie, not sure at all what I was getting into. All of the pledges were lined up outside the house while some sixty brothers were inside. There was loud, pounding music and some sort of weird screaming. I tried not to appear as nervous as I felt and it seemed like the other pledges were doing the same. We waited as they called us in through the front door, one at a time. No one came back.

When my name was called I stepped out of line and walked to the front door. Inside there was a sea of faces yelling and pushing me down the hallway and into a main room of the house. The music was very loud and the center of the room was empty, like a runway. Brothers lined the exterior of the room, looking at me and cheering like I was about to kick a field goal.

An older brother came up and put his arm around my shoulder, leaning in close so I could hear what he said.

"When we say go," he yelled into my ear, "we want you to run at full speed across this room and jump down that flight of stairs." He pointed at a stairwell that led to the basement, on the far end of the room. I could see nothing beyond the top step but I remembered that staircase. It was at least twenty steps.

"Are you ready?" he cried out.

“No!” I replied.

“Ok, let’s start the countdown!” the brother cried.

“I said I’m *not* ready,” I yelled. It wasn’t totally clear if they couldn’t hear me or were just ignoring me.

“TEN, NINE, EIGHT,” the whole room started chanting.

I wish I could tell you that I exercised my right to say no. Eighteen years of excellent parenting should have told me that hazing was hazing and I did not have to comply and I could turn around right then and walk out the door.

“SEVEN, SIX, FIVE,” cried the room. My heart was pounding.

“FOUR, THREE, TWO, ONE” –

I rushed across the room like my life depended on it, to wild cheering. I reached the edge of the staircase. I leapt.

By the time both of my feet were in the air I could see what I had *hoped* would be true. The entire bottom third of the staircase was covered in mattresses and pillows. I landed in them like a bag of laundry. After each of us had taken the leap and were pulled out of the pillows and were reassembled in the fraternity basement, we were given a *very* serious speech about trusting the house and fully committing to the process and just taking the leap into the sacred brotherhood of Sigma Phi Epsilon. “Would we trust the fraternity with our very lives?” asked a very intense sophomore.

Um.....no, I thought to myself. Just a month earlier someone had broken their arm by falling out of their own bedroom window. So, no, I do not trust you.

Please don’t hear this sermon as an endorsement of hazing or fraternity life in any fashion. But I’ve been thinking about eighteen year-old me and why I did it. Why I was even there in the first place. Even as I found

the fraternity ridiculous, I couldn't deny this: I *was* hungry for friends that were worth dying for. I was hungry for experiences that were going to push me beyond the boring boundaries of my own self. So when my time came and my name was called, I sprinted into the unknown and jumped.

There are so many ways we could talk about the Lazarus story. It's so long and complex and important.

It is, obviously, a pretty dramatic piece of foreshadowing. Jesus' years of ministry follow a pattern of escalation, especially as John tells the story. His travels have taken in him into the small towns of Galilee and Judea, into Jericho and finally back towards Jerusalem. His teaching and miracles have drawn increasingly large crowds and increasing tension with both religious and political authorities. But John's Gospel presents the raising of Lazarus as the hinge on which the whole narrative turns.

It's worth noting, as always, that while John is pointed in his use of the term "the Jews," this label includes the large crowd of mourners gathered around Mary and Martha, those who believed in Jesus and those who didn't. Presumably, it also included Jesus, Martha, and Mary themselves. But some of those who witnessed the miraculous raising of Lazarus reported it to the authorities.

"What are we to do?" the chief priests ask themselves behind closed doors. "This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." "From that day onward," verse 53 says, "they planned to put him to death."

There is an anti-Semitic reading of the text to be had here, if one is not careful, but to me there is also a much more universal application. It is a very human thing to build systems and beliefs and strategies into our life to cope with the fact that we simply don't know what it going to happen to us when we walk out the door. And when someone disrupts those systems, beliefs and strategies, even with the promise of resurrection, there is a part of us that recoils from that. I hear that voice

in the anxious huddle of priests, and believe me I hear it Christian gatherings, and neighborhood associations, and board rooms. It is a human thing.

The authorities are unnerved by signs of life where they only expect death. They worry, probably correctly, that such unvarnished resurrection will lead many to believe in Jesus' power, and that such a revelation will lead to revolution. They worry, again correctly, that such a revolution could end very badly for Israel. It is the *uncertainty*, the lack of control that is unbearable to them. Drawing so close to new life may not be worth it.

Mary and Martha have a similar fear, but it is much more relatable. Jesus invites them to roll away the stone of the tomb where their brother's un-embalmed corpse is sealed away. Unlike the religious authorities, the sisters are *desperate* to see a resurrection. They would give anything to have their brother walking and talking and breathing again. But it is also the *uncertainty* that unnerves them. Their brother's death has broken their hearts but at least it is contained. To open the tomb again is not simply to expose themselves to terrible sights and smells. It is also to open their hearts to the *possibility* of resurrection. Who could bear the disappointment if that doesn't bear out?

Drawing so close to death, they worry, might not be worth it.

It's a funny thing, meditating on the death and resurrection of Lazarus, with Easter right around the corner. What does it *mean*? Is the raising of Lazarus equivalent to a super-healing, like the healing of the blind man but more comprehensive? Or is it a prologue to Jesus own resurrection, a miracle of a different order?

I'm inclined towards the latter. Lazarus will die again. No one seems to suggest otherwise. More than anything, his resurrection seems to be less a theological project than something that comes straight from Jesus' gut. Jesus proclaims himself to be the resurrection for all people – new life, more powerful than death, but look: he is weeping. He is deeply disturbed in his soul. He goes to such lengths to bring Lazarus back for

even just a few more years. Why? I think it's because even when you *are* the resurrection, death sucks.

It *matters* that Jesus feels this way about Lazarus, because it signals to us that knowledge of the promises of resurrection does not give us a pass when it comes to walking through the valley of the shadow of death. In fact, the valley of the shadow of death might be an essential passage.

We hold a space for faith. We proclaim Christ's promises. But we still navigate that bitter reality, which comes to each of us, sooner or later.

I came back from spring break that first year of college as freshly minted, freshly initiated brother of Sigma Phi Epsilon. I had summoned the courage to leap into the unknown. I submitted to various indignities. I had repeated the solemn pledges of brotherhood with a mostly straight face. I learned the sacred secrets of – if not the universe – at least the tired old binder of rules and rituals locked in a closet on the second floor.

I came back from spring break that freshman year of college to learn that one of my new fraternity brothers had drowned in a kayaking accident on the Gauley River in West Virginia. The news was delivered by our president in a weird and shaky voice in that same old basement. We were stunned.

Two things were immediately clear to me.

First, the rituals and traditions of the fraternity had nothing to offer us in the face of this tragic and utterly unfair death.

Second, the man who drowned was in a very real and heartbreaking sense my brother.

I wasn't able to attend the funeral but there was a memorial service at the Presbyterian Church on campus. We walked to the sanctuary as a house, in blazers and ties, and listened to the minister recite to us the

promises of Jesus. I can't remember his exact words but I'm sure it was something along the lines of:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

Here's an irony. The pledging process, the rituals, the talk of brotherhood, the leap into darkness – it was all just playacting compared to the experience of walking that valley together. It was a farce that at best approximated a very real and powerful thing than none of us would have signed up for.

Look: I'm not trying to suggest that everyone there believed it or that things were forever different. But my God I will not soon forget how it felt that day, walking across campus in a solemn line. I realized with some surprise from out of my grief. This was the connection, the brotherhood that I had been looking for.

Here's a hard truth, brought to you and me, courtesy of Lazarus:

There is no real resurrection without real death. Healing? Sure. Encouragement? Without a doubt. But resurrection? The miracle of heart-pounding, tomb-opening new life is the final act of a three-act play with a very difficult middle passage. It's something none of us cares to sit through.

We who claim the promises of the Gospel have a powerful message of hope to share with the world – a message of love that transcends suffering. A message of life that transcends death. That's Easter. I claim it for so many people in my life – people who are bravely dealing with cancer and divorce and disappointment and the memories of people they love. The promises of the Gospel are real.

But there is this temptation to try and get there by skating across the top of the human experience, by minimizing our struggles, by suggesting that everything is fine. We, like those anxious priests, huddle in secret

meetings, wondering how we are going to keep it all going like solid people of faith.

What I hear Jesus saying, his eyes full of tears, is that we can let that go. What I hear Jesus saying is that we need to move closer to the tomb. We need to be brave enough to open the door to resurrection and there is no way to do that without confronting the realities of death.

It is no more or less than the hard work of being a real human being who loves and is loved in the face of incredible uncertainty. Imagine how powerful it would be we could be the church who walks that road together. Sisters and brothers in the company of a God who is willing to go there too. Telling the truth. Stepping out of the shadows. Unbinding those previously believed to be dead. Bringing signs of resurrection, not just in that great getting up morning, but right here.

The question that I have for you today, my friends, is this:

Is there a place in your world where you hear Jesus calling you to step out a little further than you care to go? In a relationship, your work, your sense of calling? Is there a place where you are being invited to embrace the uncertainty and follow Jesus out?