

Death has no power

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There's a mighty big question that hangs in the air for us as we read the story of Lazarus from John's gospel. For the writer of the gospel, the point of the incarnation, the coming of Jesus into the world, is that all might believe and through believing, have life. Throughout John's gospel there's a constant battle between light and darkness, life and death and here, just before the entry into Jerusalem, in the raising of Lazarus, it reaches a penultimate climax. This event points to the life-giving power of God, through the presence and command of Jesus and will precipitate his arrest, trial and crucifixion and will also anticipate his resurrection. The question that Jesus asks a weeping Martha is one for us also; "Do you believe in this?"

This week's Hebrew Scriptures reading from Ezekiel tells a story of life out of death. In a vision the Lord shows the prophet a valley of dry bones and leads him to prophesy to the bones to reconnect and take on flesh. This is an image of restoration through faith in God. It speaks of the power of God to bring life and healing to God's people, the people of Israel, even when all that can be seen is dust, desolation and destruction.

Read the story of the raising of Lazarus in John 11: 1-45. It's a story written to lead God's people out of the darkness of death and into the light of life. It's a story to get us ready for Good Friday, a story that will sit with us in the silence of Saturday and then resonate with rejoicing on Easter morning. It's the seventh and final miracle, the seventh and final sign in John's gospel that gives us insight into the purpose and power of faith in Jesus the Christ. This story swirls with emotion; grief and anger, bewilderment and wonder, accusations and acclamations all wrapped up in an intimate story of Jesus and his followers and friends.

We will wonder about the power of God, our rational minds will not make sense of new flesh on decaying bones and new breath after death. This is mystery beyond our capacity and we do not need to stay there. If we get stuck in trying to sort that out, we miss the gift. It is our story. We are called out of whatever it is that binds us to death and we are drawn back into life, the life that is eternal, here and now and always. The voice of Jesus calls us. Can we make the move? Death has no power.

Do you believe in this?

The following is from Jan Richardson, she speaks eloquently of the binding of grief and the fear of death, and the unbinding that is possible when you believe - <http://paintedprayerbook.com/>

When we suffer an agonizing loss, something of us goes into the grave. As we wrestle with our grief, we will be visited by questions about what new life waits for us. We will find ourselves faced with a choice: will we gather the graveclothes more tightly around ourselves, or will we respond to the voice of Christ, who stands at the threshold and calls us to come out?

The choosing is not to be rushed. We need to give the weeping and wailing their due, the tears and the anger their place. It is only in reckoning with death—including the death that has taken place within us—that we can begin to discern what new life lies beyond the tomb of our heart.

In this Lenten week, I want to share a blessing I wrote several years ago as I reflected on the story of Lazarus. This was a pivotal blessing for me. It opened my eyes to what a blessing can do—how it can meet us where we feel most lifeless and call us to enter our lives anew.

At the time, I wrote about being struck that Jesus does not go into the tomb to pull Lazarus out. He does not enter his realm to haul him to this side of living. Lazarus has to choose whether he will loose himself from the hold of the grave: its hold on him, his hold on it. Only when Lazarus takes a deep and deciding breath, rises, returns back across the boundary between the living and the dead: only then does Jesus say to the crowd,

"Unbind him, and let him go." Not until Lazarus makes his choice does the unwinding of the shroud begin, and the graveclothes fall away.

That, too, is part of what a blessing can do. It can stir in us the power to rise up and choose life anew. It can help us begin to imagine what that new life might be like. A blessing can help us breathe into the life that waits for us here, within this life.

On this day, as we keep company with Lazarus and hear the voice of Christ calling to us, what will we choose? What might we need to let go of, to loose ourselves from, so that we can move with freedom into the life to which Christ calls us?

Lazarus Blessing

The secret
of this blessing
is that it is written
on the back
of what binds you.

To read
this blessing,
you must take hold
of the end
of what
confines you,
must begin to tug
at the edge
of what wraps
you round.

It may take long
and long
for its length
to fall away,
for the words
of this blessing
to unwind

in folds
about your feet.

By then
you will no longer
need them.

By then this blessing
will have pressed itself
into your waking flesh,
will have passed
into your bones,
will have traveled
every vein

until it comes to rest
inside the chambers
of your heart
that beats to
the rhythm
of benediction

and the cadence
of release.

—Jan Richardson