

This Love Changes Our Priorities©
Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 15, 2015
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Text: Galatians 5:13-16; Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:17-46

Here we are ... today is already the fourth Sunday in Lent. I want to draw your attention to the front of your bulletin, looking at the picture and the theme of our Lenten focus – *This Love Changes Everything!*

And note the theme Scripture from 1 John 4:10: “This is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us.” That is the focus! If you don’t remember a word that Shaun or I have preached during this Lenten Season, I hope you will remember that we are reflecting on love – not our love for God, but God’s amazing love for us. And we are contemplating just how it is that this love – God’s love for us – changes everything for us.

So far, we have talked about how this love is real; how this love *does* change everything; and how this love – God’s love, shown to us in Jesus – and the cross – changes our love for others.

Today we consider how it is that God’s love changes our priorities.

As a pastor, I sometimes am asked by people to help them think through what they might want for their funeral service. Many people choose to do this, as well as make arrangements with the funeral home, so that it relieves their loved ones of having to make so many tough decisions at a time when it’s difficult to think.

When I talk to a person about their wishes for a service – we Presbyterians call it *The Witness to the Resurrection* rather than a funeral service – I ask them what Scriptures are a favorite; what has been their life Scripture. I ask what their favorite hymns are and why those hymns have meant so much. I ask about special readings and if there is someone (a friend or relative) they prefer to have read. Will the congregation sing hymns or will there be special music?

But regardless of all the planning ahead we can do, there is one thing we cannot plan – and that is what people will say about us. The person can tell me about hobbies and favorite stories in their life, but we don’t get to determine what others will say about who we are and what we have done.

Most of us don't have the experience Tom Sawyer had. Remember the story in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, written by Mark Twain?

Tom and Huckleberry Finn and their friend Joe Harper sneak off to spend a few nights on Jackson's Island – a secluded spot in the middle of the Mississippi River.

The boys didn't bother to share their plans with anyone, so of course, after two days, their families become very worried. They finally decide that the boys must have drowned.

So, they plan a funeral for Sunday. The minister preaches quite a sermon, telling all the virtues of these wonderful boys who have died way too early and lost their potential for becoming great adults.

Of course, everybody in the congregation gets so emotional, weeping and sobbing. But, the boys come home and end up hiding, and listening to their own funeral sermon!

Not many of us will have that kind of experience. And we really don't have the power to determine what others will say about us, do we?

Or, do we? That is the question to hold in mind as we consider our readings this morning.

Today we hear about death and resurrection. We can almost see it as we watch with the prophet, Ezekiel – looking out at this deep valley that looks like a graveyard for human bones – bones that have dried up and scorched from the hot, burning sun.

These bones represent Israel, held captive by the Babylonians. James A. Wallace wrote about this passage in Ezekiel. "These are people who have lost heart, who are suffering a death of the spirit, a living death in exile in a foreign land.

Their temple has been destroyed, their holy city plundered, their leaders maimed and put in chains, their soldiers put to the sword, their young men and women either killed, or dragged off into a foreign land.

Ezekiel witnesses the soul of his people gradually wither and die, becoming as lifeless as a valley of dry bones. 'Can these bones live?' That is what God asks."¹ And the answer, of course, is that God is the only one who knows.

But, Ezekiel witnessed the promise of restoration and new life as he did what God commanded, speaking to those dried up bones, saying "Thus says the Lord God: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live."

¹ Wallace, James A. "Feasting on the Word: A Thematic Resource for Preaching and Worship, Lenten Companion," ©2014 Westminster John Knox Press, page 90

And with Ezekiel, we watch the promise unfold, as God breathes life and resurrection into His people.

It is the same breath that calls forth Lazarus in our gospel story. It's not too difficult to put ourselves right there among those who mourn the death of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, and the friend of Jesus.

We have either been right in the midst of the pain of losing a loved one, or we have been standing by, giving support, witnessing the grief of families.

Jesus finally arrives, but he came too late. We ask ourselves, along with the grief-ridden sisters of Lazarus, along with the disciples of Jesus: "what is wrong with him? Of all the healings he performed, why wouldn't he rush to Lazarus while he was still breathing, and heal him?"

But, no, Jesus arrived on the scene four days after Lazarus died. In that day, it was believed that four days was considered the final time of total, complete death – the time when the soul is no longer near; the soul has finally departed from the body.

So Mary and Martha are understandably inconsolable. Martha tells Jesus she knows if he had been there, her brother would have lived. Martha and Mary trust Jesus as a friend, as a teacher, a healer and a miracle worker, and they profess to believe he is the Messiah, sent from God.

They believe in the resurrection of the dead on the last day, but they really have no understanding, no reference that helps them to know what Jesus means when he says "I am the resurrection and the life."

And so, we follow as Jesus walks with Mary and Martha to the cave where Lazarus has been laid; the place where the stone lies against the opening, sealing the tomb. We wonder what could possibly happen now. We see Jesus, as he too, becomes enveloped in grief.

And we hear him say, "Take away the stone."

Martha is shocked. "Lord, it's been four days! There will be a terrible smell."

Jesus turns to her and asks, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

And we watch as the stone is rolled away. And every single thing around us is silent. The birds stop singing. The wind stops blowing. The people stop sobbing. And then the voice of the Lord cries out:

“LAZARUS, COME OUT!”

“We know what happens next, but we breathlessly await Lazarus’s emergence from the tomb. “Lazarus, come out!” Reverberates throughout the tomb, awakening Lazarus’s lifeless body to the revivifying call of life.”²

And the man who was dead, now walks out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, his face wrapped in a cloth, as well. And Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

And this was the last sign, the most powerful sign of who Jesus really was. Had he gone before Lazarus died and healed him, it would have been a miracle, yet they had already seen him heal. But now, in this sign, many people believed.

And of course, some were not pleased, even with this amazing act.

As Christians, we believe in the power of resurrection. Being Easter people – those who are on the other side of the cross - we believe that Jesus’ death was not final, but that the mighty power of God resurrected him from death to life. We look forward to the end of the dreariness – the dry, barren valley of Lent – and to the joy of the Easter celebration, singing the alleluias.

It is this love of God, given to us through Jesus that changes us from dark hopelessness to bright hope, from deep sorrow to great joy, from the stillness of mourning to the liveliness of dancing. It is the breath of God breathing into us that revives us, restores life, causing us to believe that death does not have the last word, even when there are no signs of life left.

Veronica Miles wrote in her commentary about this passage: “Resurrection and life are central to the meaning that we make for our lives, informing our sense of Christian vocation.

In this respect, resurrection confronts us as an urgent call, beckoning us to consider the possibility that those whom our world deems socially, physically, spiritually and emotionally dead might live into a new reality.

We pray for the power of resurrection in the lives of persons and communities bound by the grave-clothes of war, genocide, poverty, disease, dis-ease, systemic abuse, and systemic oppression.

² Et al, Veronica Miles, p. 95

Releasing persons and communities from the clutches of death also demands something of *us*, as did Lazarus's resurrection of his community. Though Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb, he urged those who were alive and well, **'Unbind him, and let him go.'**

So maybe we can answer yes to the question I asked earlier – do we have the power to control what people say about us when we leave this world?

If we really are people of the resurrection; if we truly do know this transformation from what feels like death in our lives to a renewal of our spirits, our minds, our hearts; if we know the love of our great God who sent us this Son who gave his all for us, then we can't help but have our priorities changed.

It is this love, living in us, that propels us out into the community and sometimes much farther than that, to be a part of unbinding those whom Jesus has resurrected; helping them to get on their feet again, showing the same love we have been shown.

Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians: "You are called to freedom!" It isn't that we **HAVE** to show love and mercy and grace; we don't **HAVE** to serve others. God will love us just as much if we choose not to do those things.

But, because we are free – free from the sin that had us enslaved, free from guilt, free from the fear of death itself – we have the joy and the privilege of doing all we can so others may be unbound as we have been.

This love changes everything! It changes who we are. It changes our priorities so that others may see the new life is us and so we can be a vessel for others to experience it as well. Hopefully, **THAT** is what they will talk about at my funeral service.

"This is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us."

Thanks be to God! Amen.

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