

**On the Path: *Unbound Power*©****Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:17-46****March 11, 2018****Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates****The Fourth Sunday in Lent**

Today, on this fourth Sunday in our Lenten journey, we continue on the pathway to the cross. We are following Jesus and stopping along the way as we learn from him and witness over and over again just who he really is.

This year's focus is all about seeing Jesus more clearly and experiencing the amazing events and lessons we see happening as we make our way to the cross, following in his footsteps.

If we really put ourselves there with Jesus and those around him – if we allow ourselves to be in that moment with him – we can't help but be affected. It can be a bit frightening; it can be a difficult path to take; it sometimes takes courage and perseverance to stay the course for such a long time; but it also can be transformational – life changing.

We are quickly approaching the cross at this point. In fact, we have been to Jerusalem with Jesus already, where he had another run in with the temple leaders. They began trying to stone him and kill him, but Jesus left.

John tells us he went across the Jordan back to Galilee where he was baptized by John. That's where he is when he gets the news that Lazarus – his very good friend – is dying. And the plea from Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, is for Jesus to come right away. They know Jesus can heal their brother if he just gets there in time.

The town of Bethany where Lazarus is dying, is only two miles from Jerusalem. After the experience they had had the last time they were there, the disciples begged Jesus not to go back. "Please, let's stay here," they were saying, Here in Galilee, where it's safe. Do not go back to Judea. You will be killed."

Well, yea. Jesus already knew he would be killed. That was the plan all along. Going back to Jerusalem – regardless of how many stops and miracles he performed – that was his pathway that led to the cross.

But he continued putting off going to Bethany. Two days later, he finally said, "Let's go." And he told them bluntly that Lazarus was dead. And he said he was glad he wasn't there so that they would believe.

How puzzling that must have been for the disciples. How afraid they were, and yet, Thomas said, "Okay then. let's go with him. We will die with Jesus if he is killed."

Little did he know just how horrible that death would be and how every one of them would run and hide. For a while.

When they arrived in Bethany, they discovered that Jesus was right – Lazarus had been dead and in the tomb for four days. Mary and Martha were beside themselves with grief, and some

bewilderment, as well. They did not understand why Jesus didn't come right away so their brother – his very good friend – would have been healed and would still be alive.

There were many people there on that day, trying to console Martha and Mary. They watched as Jesus went to the tomb. They saw him weeping with great emotion.

John says when Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in his spirit, and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.'

And Jesus began to weep.

So, the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!'

But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

And when he arrived at the tomb, Jesus became overcome with emotion again and, once again, began weeping.

The shortest sentence in the Bible (in the King James version) is "Jesus wept." But that little sentence is packed with the stuff of humanity and of divinity as well.

Of course, the human man, Jesus, would weep and grieve as he sees the grief of his dear friends whom he most likely stayed with when he was in Jerusalem or the vicinity. These friends – Mary, Martha and Lazarus – were like family to him. They loved him, and he loved them.

So, he grieved. It is so moving to see loved ones crying over their loss of someone they love dearly. And if you are also close to that person, it is impossible not to have some emotion as well.

But, Jesus knew he was about to turn all that around. He would change their mourning into joyful dancing. He would bring Lazarus back from the dead. Lazarus would live again.

And yet, Jesus wept.

I wonder if Jesus – the Son of God – who knew what heaven is like, who knew that Lazarus was past all the earthly things that cause us pain and despair, all the hurt, all the guilt – even death itself – I wonder if some of his weeping was about the very fact that he was about to bring Lazarus back into that earthly life where he, once again, would be experiencing all those painful things. Instead of being in that perfect place with God.

But this was about believing. This was about preparation for the very death that Jesus himself would be going to very, very soon. This was leading to the cross – and finally – to Jesus' resurrection.

And Jesus told them to open the tomb. Of course, there was shock and objection, even from his sister. “Lord, it’s been four days.” And as the King James version translates it – “Surely he stinketh.”

It was the belief back then that after four days the persons death was complete. There was no hope for healing and life after that. And already the body would have begun decomposing and would “stinketh to high heaven.”

But Jesus looked upwards and said, ‘Father, I thank you for having heard me. I know 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.’

And, we remember how Jesus said that God loved the world so much that he sent his only son, that **whoever believes in him**, would not perish (would not be lost in death) but would have everlasting life. It was so important, for their sakes, that they would believe in him. As it is so important for us, still today.

And Jesus, the son of God, is standing outside that tomb where Lazarus, the dead man lay. And then he called out in a powerful, commanding voice ... **LAZARUS! COME OUT!**

And the crowd witnessed this amazing, probably somewhat fearful thing – Lazarus, the dead man, came stumbling out of the tomb, still wrapped in his grave clothes.

And Jesus said, “Unbind him and set him free!”

And we are here on this pathway with Jesus and Mary and Martha, witnessing this unbound power of a Savior who was just about to take on all the sins of every man and woman in the past and in the future generations so that they – so that **we**, too – might be unbound and set free;

So that we might be given new life, both in earthly life, but even better – life everlasting in that place of glory where there is no more weeping, or pain, or sin, or violence, or fear, or worry. Just peace and joy with Christ, our Savior.

Of course, we remember that this is not the only resurrection story in the bible. We heard from Ezekiel that God breathed life into those dry bones that were lying there in Death Valley – bones that were withered and long past the desperation of needing water. They were nothing. They had nothing left – no breath, no hope, no vision, no life. Of course, they were a metaphor for the people of Israel who had lost their way.

And God breathed life into them once again and filled his people with new vision, with hope for a future, and the promise of the one true God who loved and led them.

And we hear stories in the gospels about Jesus raising the 12 year old daughter of Jairus from death to life (Matthew 9:18-26).

And when he was on his way into the little village of Nain, in Galilee, Jesus passed a funeral procession that was going out of the village to the cemetery, taking a poor widow's dead son to be buried (Luke 7:11-17).

And again, Jesus had compassion and raised that son from death to life. That place, that gateway into and out of Nain, became the place where death and life collided, where life conquered death.

Jesus' power was on the loose, all the time he was on earth. And we learn that with Jesus, we have life, we have hope, we have transformation. We learn that Jesus' compassion for humans who are hurting, who are weak and lost, goes very deep into his own being.

I think of that sweet song – Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong. They are weak, but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me.

We are weak, but he is strong. He is so strong that he brings life back to those who are dead – whether it be a spiritual death, a lost and hopeless kind of death in life, or actual, physical death – the kind of death we will all face one day.

But ultimately, Jesus conquers death forever in the cross. This story, and all stories, lead us to the cross, my friends. Jesus Christ loved us so much that he went back to the place where he knew they would kill him. (But they would only be able to do that because he let them.)

And he would suffer. Oh, how he would suffer at their hands, but also at *our* hands and because of *our* sin. He would take on all the sins of the world, and even the Father would turn away for that brief time and he – the Son of God – would feel so alone that he would cry out to God, his Father, asking, “Why? Why have you forsaken me?”

But, as powerful as this story is about Jesus commanding Lazarus to come out of the tomb – we can only imagine the powerful voice of God Almighty whose compassion and love for his son, commanded the stone to be rolled away from the tomb and then his own voice comes booming out, ricocheting from wall to wall inside that tomb, crying:

**JESUS! JESUS, MY BELOVED SON! GET UP AND COME OUT!**

And the angels of God unbound him, and Jesus was raised from death to life.

There is much to learn as we witness this story from John where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. We see Jesus' deep love and human emotion and compassion for others who are hurting in grief. We can be comforted in knowing that Jesus feels our pain and understands what we feel when we lose someone we love.

We can be filled with hope that this story shows us life in a symbolic way – Jesus transforms our dead and hopeless spirits into new life again – filled with hope and vision.

And we can learn from this that, as Jesus' friends and followers, we too must reach out and give Christ to others, so they will witness and experience the new life he offers.

But more important than anything is the cross and what Jesus accomplished there. His greatest purpose in allowing Lazarus to die was so that, in his raising him up, people would see who he is and believe.

He had such a short time left on earth. And many did believe. And some wanted to kill him.

Let us continue as we follow Jesus on this pathway to the cross.

But this morning, you are invited to take the time to come and light a candle representing eternal life. You may be thinking of a loved one who is there now with Jesus. Or you may light the candle just giving thanks that Jesus has the unbound power to raise us from death to life.

Come. Come out of the tombs you may be lying in. Tombs that feel like death and lost hope, lost vision. Tombs of fear, of sickness and despair.

**COME! COME OUT OF THAT TOMB. AND LIVE!**

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