

# *Unbinding Lazarus*

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*John 11:32-44*

William Butler Yeats wrote a wonderful imagined conversation between Lazarus and Jesus, set just after the dead man is dragged reluctant and stinking from his tomb. It gives poetic voice to the resentment, the resistance to resurrection, which Lazarus feels. He captures the conversation between the lines in the Gospel of John. Let me read a little.

*Says Lazarus to Christ:*

*Lazarus: For four whole days*

*I had been dead and I was lying still*

*In an old comfortable mountain cavern*

*When you came climbing there with a great crowd*

*And dragged me to the light.*

*Christ: I called your name:*

*"Lazarus, come out", I said, and you came out*

*Bound up in cloths, your face bound in a cloth."*

*Lazarus: You took my death, give me your death instead.*

*Christ: I gave you life.*

*Lazarus: But death is what I ask.*

*Alive I never could escape your love,*

*And when I sickened towards my death I thought,*

*'I'll to the desert, or chuckle in a corner,*

*Mere ghost, a solitary thing.' I died*

*And saw no more until I saw you stand*

*In the opening of the tomb; 'Come out!' you called;*

*You dragged me to the light as boys drag out*

*A rabbit when they have dug its hole away;*

*And now with all the shouting at your heels*

*You travel towards the death I am denied.\**

There is a hold that death has, even after we have been restored to life. In the raising of Lazarus Jesus calls not once but twice: First he calls to a dead Lazarus in the tomb. He stands in the doorway and says "Lazarus, come out!" And then there is a second word, calling not Lazarus, but those who surround him. "Unbind him," he says to the people there. "Unbind him and let him go!"

Many of us who gather in this place know what it means to have experienced, if not death, then despair; if not mortality, then mortal fear. We know what it means to have been shut away in a dark cavern of surrender, hidden from the light. We know what it means to give up life, even to choose to trade it for half life, mere existence. It's easier not to hope. It is easier not to be raised up. It is easier not to walk out of the tomb...and so when Christ calls, "Lazarus come out," and drags us out of death, even when we emerge blinking in the daylight we are still bound, half-resurrected, raised but not yet released.

In this very room, there are many of us who have been restored to life one way or another over the years. We know what it means to emerge from the tomb, even from a tomb of our own making. Oh, we may

“forget” it for months, or deny it, or even, like Yeats’ Lazarus, whine about it. But here we stand in the daylight.

The problem is that we aren’t always quite sure what to do with resurrection. We remain somehow bound in the grave cloths that were appropriate to our former condition. And we cannot unbind *ourselves*. Alone we cannot undo the bondage of death. That unbinding takes community. That takes trust. It takes people willing to walk up to the groaning mummy that has hopped out, and unravel the bandages, caring enough and compassionate enough to look at what lies beneath. Unbinding Lazarus takes real people, you and me, ready to affirm the humanity of each one who has died and been raised up, to unbind each one who emerges in our midst, still wounded, still bearing the smell of fear and death. It takes courage. It takes community.

What are the cords of death that continue to tie us to our past? What is the covering that hides our faces from the day? For some these take the form of sheer anxiety. For some the bandages, the bindings, are apparent in our resentment of the religious dogma of communities that shunned us. We’ve got baggage! Invisible bondage. We know what it is Lazarus-like to be unready, ill-prepared to move past the paralysis of death. We shrink back from love. We are still wounded. We are still tied up in knots, body and soul, by the trauma, the despair, the defeat we know.

Today we ordain new deacons here at Binkley church, good people you as a church have elected to walk with you as companions on the road of faith. Yesterday many of them were present at a retreat where we talked about what the ministry of caring is all about. We were led in a wonderful discussion by Carol Ripley-Moffitt on the care of souls and had some good practice learning simply how to listen better. And yet today I want to say something more to each of these new deacons.

We, your congregation, call you, yes, to the tasks of listening, of encouragement, of care of bodies and souls alike. But we also call you to that further summons which is Christ’s call of the whole Church: your calling is about caring, but it is not limited to caring. Your calling is also: “Unbind them”. This is indeed the great calling of this congregation.

Through these doors walk individuals whom Love has raised from the tombs of self-abnegation and pride alike. But Christ has hauled us out. Here enter some who have been told they were worth little or nothing, whether because of the way they looked or whom they loved. Here enter others who know the pain of seeing their homeland destroyed, whether by natural disaster or human tyranny. Here come some who know what it is like to die inside because your relatives and friends have died. But Love has raised us. Here come some who have decided not to hide their disability or difference any more. But Christ has said to us, “Come out.” And Christ says to you, our new deacons, “Unbind them!” And we your people add: “Unbind us! Set us free as individuals and as a community to love, to hope, to act in faith. We need you to pick at our knots. We need you to dare to see our hidden faces. We need you to challenge us to believe that the resurrection is real.”

What is it that yet binds Lazarus in this time? Ask yourself! Ask your neighbor. And prepare to walk forward to bless and send these whom you have selected, not only for the ministry of comfort, but also for the unbinding of all God’s children, for the courageous work of liberation and love.

\*Quotation from WB Yeats’ play *Calvary* (1921).