

John 11:17-27, 38-53

We like stories with fairy-tale endings. Not fairy-tales...we like true stories where the main characters end up living happily-ever-after. We're warmed by stories where a lost child is found, where a soldier reunites with his family, where a home is rebuilt by the people of the community, where a near tragedy ends in triumph.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is not one such story, although on the surface it appears to be. Lazarus, dead for four days, is raised to life by Jesus. His sisters, Mary and Martha, full of tears at first, rejoice to receive their brother back alive. The people throughout the region are amazed. Many of them, seeing this great sign, believe in Jesus. Jesus gained more followers, Mary and Martha were happy again, Lazarus became the toast of the town--everyone wanted to shake hands with the man who had come back from the dead. Truly a story that warms our hearts. Until we read further in St. John's Gospel. The Chief Priests, who hated Jesus, were not at all thrilled to see this great miracle. In fact, they made plans to put Jesus to death. And not only that, they made plans to kill Lazarus also because on account of him throngs of people were turning to Jesus. What happened to our "happily-ever-after" story? In a very short time it turned into a murderous, hate-filled, crime drama. For the rest of his life, Lazarus would have to watch his back. How long before he would be put back in the grave? How long before his sisters would weep again for him?

There is a great similarity between the story of Lazarus and our own story. We who were spiritually dead--once we were raised to life in Holy Baptism, our story also fails to be the fairy-tale story we would like for it to be. When Lazarus was dead, the devil could not touch him. But when he was raised to life, you can be sure that Satan tried everything to make his life difficult and miserable. And so with us. Those people who are spiritually dead--without faith in Christ--are not special targets of Satan. But you who have been raised to life with Christ in baptism, he attacks you with every weapon in his arsenal.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's go back to the tomb of Lazarus and begin there. If ever there was a Bible story which sets forth in almost exact detail what happened to you when you were baptized, it is the story of Lazarus. "You were dead in your trespasses and sins," says the Apostle Paul in Ephesians. We were there in the tomb with Lazarus. He was dead...not able to make a decision, not able to come to life, not able to do a thing except to stay dead. We were spiritually dead at birth...not able to make ourselves alive in Christ, not able to accept Jesus into our heart, not able to make some great decision to be His follower. Had Jesus not come to Lazarus' tomb that day, Lazarus would have never come out of the grave. And had He not come to us on the day of our baptism, you and I would not have become His Christians. But as Jesus called Lazarus to life, so through the water and Word at the font, Jesus called us to life in Him. The power was not within Lazarus, nor within us--not even a little bit. It was all God. One hundred percent. He alone calls the dead to life.

If the story of Lazarus took place today, it would dominate the headlines around the world for weeks, maybe months. The news media would be swarming over Lazarus. He would be hounded by paparazzi and would be a guest on every television talk show. And yet when an infant, spiritually dead, is brought to life in Holy Baptism, the world pays no attention, even though the miracle of baptism is identical to the miracle of the raising of Lazarus. Both miracles happen by the power of the Word of God. But as Luther declares, "The Word they still shall let remain, nor any thanks have for it."

It is vital that we Christians understand our baptism. This is foundational to everything in our life. But as we were saying before, it does not guarantee a “happily-ever-after” story for us. And the story of Lazarus helps us to see why.

When Lazarus came out of the tomb he looked like a mummy. He was all wrapped up with his burial cloths. The second command of Jesus, therefore, was just as important as the first. We have the tendency to focus only on His first command, “Lazarus, come out!” But in coming out, Jesus then said, “Unbind him and let him go!” What kind of life would Lazarus have had if no one would have removed his burial cloths? First off, it would have been a short life. How would he breathe, eat, and drink all wrapped up? And then also, his life would have been miserable--walking around encased like a mummy. This explains why there are baptized Christians who are living difficult, depressing lives, and why there are many who do not last long as Christians. No one is removing from them their burial cloths.

The world may not swarm over you because you are baptized, but the devil does. He hounds you worse than paparazzi with their cameras flashing. Satan never ceases to wrap you up with his lies, to bind you with his alluring temptations. And daily we give in to him. Our flesh is weak and it delights in those things which are wrong and sinful. And so we who have been raised to life in baptism’s waters, day after day struggle to live as Christians because those old, sinful, stinking burial cloths keep sticking to us and bind us up within them.

You know what I mean if you have ever had a guilty conscience. You know what I mean if sin has ever had its way with you. You know what I mean if you have ever been depressed, discouraged, frustrated. Those old stinking burial cloths are suffocating. They do not allow us to live the joy-filled life of a Christian. They make life difficult, miserable. And they kill faith. Those old cloths had to be removed from Lazarus or he would not have lived very long. And Christians, too, need to be unwrapped daily because daily sin binds us up. That’s why Jesus said right away to unbind Lazarus and let him go. And the same words are for you.

In St. Matthew He puts it this way, “Go ye therefore and baptize...” and then He says in the same breath, “Teaching them all things I have commanded you.” In other words, those whom you baptize, “Unbind them and let them go.” All their life keep unbinding them. Keep My words coming into their ears and into their mouths. Unbind their sin. Unbind their guilt. “Unbind them and let them go.”

And that is what goes on here week after week, year after year. When you come up to Holy Communion you may walk up the aisle like Lazarus walked out of the tomb--dressed as a mummy, all bound up in your sins. But here at God’s altar the unbinding takes place as Christ, the Resurrection and the Life, enters you through bread and wine to set you free. You walk up bound with stinking cloths of guilt. You leave with those old cloths removed. You probably came to church today all wrapped up in those burial cloths. The sins of the past week are binding for all of us. The guilt sets in. Our old flesh takes over. But Jesus is here, and through His Gospel--the words of Absolution proclaimed to you, the words being given to you right now--He is releasing you from your sins; He is unwrapping your stinking old cloths.

Is it any wonder why the devil does not want you to be here in worship? He cannot stop you from being baptized, but he can try to keep you bound in your sin. He keeps the temptations coming. He fuels your depression, your discouragement. And he keeps you so busy with life that you have no

time to come here where Jesus unbinds you. He tells you over and over so that you believe it that worship is not necessary, that you already know all that stuff.

And with many Christians Satan is very successful. So many he keeps away from God's Word and Sacraments for months, and years, so that they become walking mummies, bound so tight with the devil's lies and their sin and guilt that they cannot ever escape. I know people like that...don't you? And so to you and me the command of Jesus is given, "Unbind them and let them go." They cannot unbind themselves. If we do not bring them to where God's Word unbinds them, they will die all wrapped up in their sin and guilt.

For you who are here today, trust in the Word of God for it is powerful. It raised Lazarus to life. It raised you to life with Christ in your baptism. And it is able, therefore, to unbind you from whatever you are all wrapped up in. Whatever your sinful past has been, Jesus right here and now unbinds you. You are forgiven. He says it, and He makes it so. He became all wrapped up in your sins on the cross, and there He died. But He rose from the dead. The grip of sin, death, and hell could not hold Him. And neither can it hold you. You may have come here today like a mummy, but those stinking cloths Jesus is removing, and He is replacing them with His mercy. He unbinds your sins from you to wrap you with His love. He unbinds your guilt from you to bind you to your faith in Him, and your hope and confidence in His gift of eternal life for you.

And so your story does have a "happily-ever-after" ending. Not yet. Not yet because as long as you live, sin and Satan will keep binding you up. But because Jesus through His Word and Sacraments keeps unbinding you and letting you go, as you remain in Christ you will live happily ever after with Him in heaven. Amen.