

## John 11:17-27, 38-53

There are two stories taking place in our Gospel reading. The one is obvious. The other, not so clear. And yet the second is a mirror image of the first. In a mirror everything is reversed. What's left is right, and what's right is left, and something makes sense only if you write it backwards.

And so we have before us the story of Lazarus. He has been dead four days, sealed up in a tomb. And the story of Lazarus is also our story. They are one and the same. As Lazarus died, so death comes into our lives as well. As Mary and Martha shed tears at the death of their brother, so with us, tears of sadness are a part of our lives because of death. As Lazarus was placed into a tomb, so we, too, have been to the graveyard, perhaps many times, and we ourselves will enter it in the end.

But into the story of Lazarus steps He who is the Resurrection and the Life, Jesus Christ. And so even in our world of death we have hope. For as Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, so will we, with our loved ones who died in Christ, be raised in the resurrection on the Last Day.

Yet this story is not only about being raised to life in the future. It's about being raised to life in the present. Martha was focused upon the Last Day when she would see her brother again. Little did she know, when Jesus said, "*Your brother will rise again,*" that He was speaking in the present tense. Lazarus would be raised "today." In the end as well, for he would die again...but Martha's tears and sorrow would last but a few minutes as Jesus led her and the others out to the tomb.

The words, "*Lazarus, come out,*" and his being raised to life seem to be almost the entire story in itself. But Jesus gave three commands at the gravesite, not just the one. "*Take away the stone,*" was the first, "*Lazarus, come out,*" was the second, and after Lazarus came out Jesus said, "*Unbind him and let him go.*" We see these commands also in our own lives. In Holy Baptism Jesus commanded the stone to be taken away as the devil was rebuked, and he was forced to vacate your heart like a stone removed from a tomb. As the water was sprinkled over you, we hear Jesus saying, not "*Lazarus,*" but your name, and you were raised from spiritual death to life in Christ just as Lazarus was raised. After you were raised to life, you had a pastor taking care of you. And Jesus' command to your pastor is the same as in the story of Lazarus, "*Unbind him and let him go.*" The word here in the Greek is the word to forgive. Even the baptized need forgiveness. As Lazarus was released of his burial cloths, so you are released of your sins as your pastor carries out Jesus' command by absolving you and giving you the Holy Supper of your Lord.

All three commands given by Jesus at the gravesite were necessary. The stone had to be removed. Death had to be swallowed up by life. And Lazarus had to be released from his burial cloths. All three commands are necessary also in your life--the commands against the devil, against death, and against sin. Your three great enemies--sin, death, and the devil--are dealt with by Jesus in your baptism, in the words of absolution, and in the Holy Supper.

All three of Jesus' commands do not happen on their own without His command. No one was about to take away the stone from the tomb of Lazarus. Martha even voiced her objection. "*There will be an odor,*" she said. The stone would not move by itself. Jesus had to command it. And neither does the devil move out of your heart apart from Jesus' command. But in your baptism, Jesus' command of rebuke drove the devil out of your heart and life.

Even with the stone removed, Lazarus was not going to come out on his own. He was dead. And so Jesus' word of command was given to bring Lazarus out of death into life. And so with you. No one

can come alive in Christ by their own power. We are born dead in our trespasses and sins. No one can decide to accept Jesus and become a Christian. It is Jesus' word of command in baptism that brings us out of death into life.

After Lazarus came out of the tomb, he looked like a mummy. But no one moved. No one said, "Here, let me help you out of your burial cloths." Jesus had to command it with the words, "*Unbind him and let him go.*" And so with you. After baptism we have the sinful notion that we can dispense with preaching and the Word of God because "we're baptized after all." We think we can go to the Lord's Supper only when we feel like it. We do not realize that living day after day in this sinful world wraps us all up in those stinking burial cloths that Lazarus was wrapped in. We do not smell our own stench because we're used to the odor. We smell the stench of our neighbor's sins, but we fail to notice our sins which wrap tightly around us and stink to high heaven.

We need to be released from our burial cloths or our sins will drag us down into unbelief and hell. We need to be forgiven of our sins as often as the AIDS patient needs his medicine. That's why Jesus' words, "*Unbind him and let him go,*" are as important for us as His words with the water at the font that gave us life to begin with. Apart from Jesus' words there is only death, even for the baptized.

And now, having seen the story of Lazarus and our own story quite clearly, we take a look in the mirror, and what we see gives us comfort and assurance. We see the mirror image of the story of Lazarus. Everything is reversed. It is all written backwards so that we can see it clearly. For Lazarus, the stone was removed, he went from death to life, and the stinking burial cloths were unwrapped from him. Now look at Jesus. He is wrapped in the stinking burial cloths of our sins, He goes from life to death on a cross, and the stone is placed at the entrance of His tomb. Jesus' story is the reverse of our own. But His story makes ours possible. Jesus' story gives meaning and hope to our story lived in Him.

Just a few verses in our text after Lazarus was unbound and let go, the Chief Priests and Pharisees gathered the Council together and they said, "*If we let Jesus go unbound like this...the Romans will come and take us away.*" And so they planned, from that day on, to arrest and bind Jesus, to put Him to death, and to seal His body in a tomb. What happened to the burial cloths of Lazarus? They were wrapped around Jesus. What happened to the death out of which Lazarus was brought? That death found Jesus on the cross. What happened to the stone that was taken away from the tomb of Lazarus? It was placed at the entrance of Jesus' tomb.

Friend, this is your comfort and hope. Jesus was wrapped up with your sins so that you are now free of them. You are forgiven because all of your sins, every stinking last one of them, was bound around Jesus. Jesus bowed His head in death so that you are given life in your baptism. Jesus' tomb was closed up with a stone so that the stone will be taken away from your tomb in the resurrection on the Last Day, and you will rise, not to die again, but to live with Him who is the Resurrection and the Life with all the saints in the glory and joy of heaven. Everything that happened to Jesus is the mirror image of what happened to you. Your sins found Him, not you. Your death claimed Him, and so it cannot claim you forever. And into your tomb Jesus was buried and then rose again, so that you now claim victory over all your enemies--sin, death, and the devil.

Now we remain in this sinful world. Now we deal with death. Now we, like Mary and Martha, continue to visit the cemetery. But keep looking in the mirror. Fix your eyes on Jesus. He is your forgiveness. He is your Resurrection and your Life. Amen.