

## John 11:1-45

We begin with a question: Why is it when Jesus heard that Lazarus was ill, rather than coming immediately, He intentionally stayed two days longer where He was? Illness had seized Lazarus. The poor man could not escape it. He needed help, but the Helper did not come. He waited for the illness to seize Lazarus completely. Jesus did not come until after Lazarus had died.

Is the answer to our question that Jesus wanted to demonstrate His power over death? Yes, and also, my friend, to assure you of His gracious power in your life now. What is it that has seized you? Is it, like Lazarus, an illness? Is it an addiction? Is it guilt...a haunting conscience that daily accuses you? Whatever it is, you may be wondering, too, why Jesus delays in coming. You want help, but where is the Helper?

Had Jesus come to Lazarus when he was ill, Lazarus would be just one more sick person healed by Jesus. But as it is, Lazarus stands alone in the record of Holy Scripture. He is the only one who was raised to life after his body had already begun to decay. If Jesus can do this for Lazarus, He can do this also for you and me.

This Bible narrative is most certainly a source of comfort and joy when we as Christian people gather together at the graveyard. But this narrative is not only for the end of our life; it speaks to us right now as people of God living in the midst of life. When we are seized by something we cannot escape, we are like Lazarus. We become a walking death. We live in our tomb of darkness. We are bound and wrapped tightly by our great enemy.

This is what sin does to us - sin and its accomplices: guilt, disease, anger, addiction, greed, lust, death... These great enemies all have in common that when they seize us, we are unable to escape their grasp. We may appear fine on the outside, but inside of us things are not fine. We may be full of life on the outside, but in truth we, like Lazarus, are dead. We are not yet buried in the grave, but part of us already is.

The Helper must come to us. The only one who can pull us out of our living death is He who entered death and the grave for us, and was raised to life again. But then why does Jesus delay in coming? St. John writes: *“Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when He heard that Lazarus was ill, He stayed two days longer in the place where He was.”* He loved this family. That’s why He delayed in coming to help. Why did Jesus allow Lazarus to die and his dear sisters to suffer grief over his death? Because He loved them. In love He let death seize Lazarus and grief seize Mary and Martha. And then, and only then, did Jesus come to help them.

The only answer that is given to you as to why your Helper delays in coming is that you are loved by Jesus. He did not stop the Tempter in the midst of his temptation against Eve, but He allowed her and Adam to be completely seized by sin and death before He came to them, because of His love for them. He loved His children in Egypt, and so He allowed the wicked Pharaoh to completely seize them before He pulled them out of Egypt through the Red Sea. He loves you, and so He allows that which is against you, and which desires you, to seize you, and then He comes to help you.

He came to Lazarus. *“Take away the stone (from the tomb),”* He commanded. *“But Lord,”* said Martha, *“there will be an odor!”* And so with you. When we are seized by a living death, there is an odor about us. We may not smell it, but others do. Perhaps they put up with it. But Jesus does more than that. In love He comes to us, not holding His nose at our stench, but holding us in His heart, and holding out to us His nail-pierced hands. *“Lazarus, come out!”* He said, *“and the man who had died came out.”*

These same words Jesus speaks to you. Not Lazarus, but your name He calls forth..."*come out!*" *Come out of your addiction. Come out of your anger, your greed, your lust. Come out of what has seized you. Come out of your darkness and death.*

Did Lazarus have to first think about it? Was he given the power to make a decision here? The power was in Jesus' words to him. And this is where the power and the help is for you today. Why is it that so many addicts - addicts to drugs, alcohol, pornography and sex, and anything else - why do so many slide back into their addiction? Because they see life as a series of choices they make, and they see the power over their addiction within the choices they make. The power is in Christ, never in us. Apart from Christ we can do nothing. The power to control our anger, our greed and lust, our giving-in to sin, our accusing conscience, is in Jesus' words: "*Come out!*" Come out of that which has seized you, not by your choice, but by the love of God in Christ Jesus that now controls you.

Friend, you can be absolutely certain that Jesus calls your name to come out, as He called the name of Lazarus, because in your Baptism is where He called you by name. "*Come out!*" He called to you there in the water, and Jesus pulled you out of sin and death. There is no choice, no decision, in Baptism. There is only the power of Christ. There is His Word to you calling you forth.

But even the baptized can, and do, fall back into a living death. Even the baptized become seized again by sin and its accomplices. And so we hear Jesus' words to those standing around the tomb: "*Unbind him and let him go!*" Lazarus was alive. Jesus called him out of death. But Lazarus could not unwrap the burial cloths which tightly bound him. Jesus commanded others to do this for him.

And so you have a pastor who is commanded by Jesus to unbind you and let you go; not just once or twice, but often...as often as you become seized and bound by sin and that which is sinful. "*Do this often,*" says Jesus of the Lord's Supper - for here in the Sacrament you receive the body and blood of Christ which unwraps your sin from you. These burial cloths are full of a foul odor. And so when we commune together, we may raise our eyebrows at those around us. We may hold our nose and wonder what they are doing at this Holy Supper. But they may wonder the same about us. We all come full of stench. Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. But for us it's been longer. How many days has it been since we have been to the Sacrament? How long have we been wearing our stinking burial cloths which our sins permeate?

But here Jesus calls and commands: "*Unbind them and let them go!*" Your sins are forgiven. All of them. On the cross Jesus wore your burial cloths for you. He took the foul odor out of them. And now you are a sweet-smelling incense to your God.

Maybe He has delayed in coming to help you. But He is here now. His Word, full of power for you, is being spoken to you today...the very same word He spoke to Lazarus. Today Jesus releases you. Today Jesus calls you out of what has seized you. Today His servant is commanded to unbind you and let you go.

And tomorrow when sin binds you again, return to Jesus' words for you in your Baptism; to the power over sin and death there in the water for you. And return to His Supper for you. Return to Jesus' house where His servant is commanded to unbind you and let you go.

This is how you are free from your guilty conscience. This is how you are pulled out of your addictions and whatever else it is that desires you. This is how you are to see life - not as a series of choices, but a daily return to the power of your Baptism; living by faith in Christ, who loved you and gave Himself for you. Amen.