

sermon-3/9/08 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Resurrection Hope”
Ezek. 37:1-14 and John 11:1-45

“Unbind him, and let him go.” Every time I read this passage in John that phrase jumps out at me. It seems to strike such a deep chord in my very soul. I suspect I am not alone in that. Many of us know what it is like to be bound by something that holds us in a death-like grip. One of our greatest hopes is to be set free from all that binds us, including death that clings so close.

By death, of course, I don't just mean our physical death at the end of life. We will all die someday. We won't ultimately be spared the experience of our own death. Even Lazarus, in our text today, will die again.

That is one of the bitter/sweet sides of this story. It must have been wonderful for Lazarus' family and friends to have him back among them. I suspect Lazarus might have been happy as well. We don't know. There was no Matt Lauer to interview him after they took off the funeral cloth. Regardless of how he felt, poor Lazarus will have to die again. He was not resurrected in this story. He was resuscitated.

But this passage points to more than our physical deaths. It refers to all the little deaths that bind our lives. It points to all those realities that carry the stink of death even while we live. Those realities prevent us from living freely and joyfully. They stink.

We can all name some of those little deaths. Anyone who has lived through a broken relationship, and even a divorce, knows intimately about the death of a relationship and the grief and guilt that go with that.

Depression is a kind of death. This little death is rampant in our society. We all can point to a friend or family member who has had to deal with depression, the medication and sometimes hospitalization that goes with that little death. Fortunately we have moved beyond the shame of admitting we are depressed. That is a great leap forward, but depression is still a little death that can immobilize us almost as much as being bound in a shroud.

Greed, and the poverty it causes, all speak of death. To be poor in this country is often to see hope die a little each and every day. Fear comes to mind as well. Some are so bound by their fears they hardly live. Fear of speaking in public, fear of confronting abuse, fear of all the bad things that might happen in the future, you name it, fear is a powerful little death.

Sadly, politics comes to my mind when thinking about little deaths. The way we handle politics in this country stinks! Long, protracted campaigns, huge amounts of money seemingly wasted on advertising that could be put to better use, and negative tactics that distort the truth, all feel like little deaths to me.

You can name your own version of death. Each of us have experienced little deaths that bind us as if in a shroud. We know all those realities that separate us from others, that distort reality so that we are not able to live with joy. All those states of mind just plain stink.

Knowing is one thing. The more important part of this is what are we going to do about those little deaths so they don't rob us of the life we have been given? That is where resurrection comes into play. John, chapter eleven, is all about resurrection. True, Lazarus was resuscitated, not resurrected, but we can't help but think about resurrection when we read this passage.

Scholars point to all the parallels between this text and the one later in John when Jesus was crucified and then resurrected. Both Lazarus and Jesus were laid in a tomb. Mary was present in both stories after the stone was rolled away. Both Jesus and Lazarus were wrapped in a shroud. In both stories someone asks, "Where have you laid him?"

We can't help but think about Jesus' resurrection when reading this passage the lectionary gives us on the fifth Sunday of Lent. It gives us a taste of Easter right here in Lent. We all are in need of a little resurrection hope about now.

But we are urged to see that the gospel of John is talking about more than just the final resurrection we all hope to experience after we physically die. We get a clue to this broader agenda when Jesus says to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life."

Jesus is saying that in his presence we can experience resurrection while we live on this earth. Granted this experience of resurrection will be mostly partial and incomplete. It can, however, give us a taste of resurrection that is so sweet, it sets a yearning in us that can guide our lives. We want a full taste.

When we take the time to nurture our relationship with God, in Christ, we begin to enter into a life so vibrant, not even death can kill it. We begin to rid ourselves of the stink of all those little deaths that cling so closely. We experience the perfume of Christ's presence drawing others to want some of that life. It ought to smell better being in the presence of those touched by the resurrection!

How does this happen? We can experience the resurrected life while we live when we are careful where we place our hopes. If you place your hopes in God and not any of those other realities that tempt you with their promises of safety and happiness, your life changes. It may not get easier, but it is far richer spiritually and in all the ways that truly matter. To live as if our hopes are in God and not in our wealth, our weapons, or our credentials, deeply affects the choices we make.

Being connected to a community that reminds us again and again to place our hopes in God certainly can help. The Church, at its best, is that kind of community. It is a place where we can reinforce all that is best in one another. It is a place where we can pick each other up when life is hard.

Churches can make a huge difference especially at the time of death. When we affirm at our funeral and memorial services that death will not have the final word in our loved one's life, nor in our own, the fear of death begins to lose its death-like grip on us.

Churches help us deal with fear in all its manifestations. The scriptures are full of angels, Jesus, and others, saying to the people, "Fear not. Fear not. Fear not." We need to hear that over and over again to be unbound by all those things that make us afraid and unable to live with exuberance.

Finally, those churches that have a Stephen Ministry program know how those ministers can begin to unbind and set people free from situations that feel hopeless. When people have been trained to be good listeners, trained to walk alongside someone in a ministry of presence, trained not to jump to simple answers or give unsolicited advice, people can be set free.

Care receivers in the program are not suddenly free of tough issues. Often those issues remain. But when someone comes alongside and shares your life in a caring way, those tough challenges lose their death grip. New possibilities seem viable. I have seen resurrection hope spring up even in times of death and grief because of the careful, loving work of Stephen Ministers.

We are going to be commissioning a new group of those ministers this day. It is one of the ways we, as a church, affirm that as the body of Christ in this world, we can help others experience a bit of what Jesus said when he called himself the resurrection and the life. When we embody resurrection hope, we embody Jesus for others. Thank God for that. Amen