

The Reverend Craig T. Kocher
Acting Dean of the Chapel and Director of Religious Life
Lent 5
John 11:17-44
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A Whole New World

Only two weeks away from Easter, the Bible serves up a rather familiar, albeit intense story from John's Gospel. Jesus' friend Lazarus was sick over in Bethany. We know this because Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, send word to Jesus. You remember Mary and Martha, two of the women Jesus has befriended during his travels. Mary is the contemplative one, the mystical one who sits at the feet of the great rabbi and later will pour expensive perfume over those feet in preparation for Jesus' own death. And her sister, Martha, the practical one who was a wizard in the kitchen, an expert hostess, who welcomed Jesus into her home and did everything she could to make him feel comfortable. They tell Jesus, "come quick, for Lazarus, the one you love is ill." Oddly, Jesus, the healer of the Galilee, friend of the friendless, Mr. Compassion, takes his sweet time arriving on the scene. In fact he waits two entire days before walking the two miles from Jerusalem to Bethany. His late arrival marks the beginning of today's gospel lesson. Lazarus has been dead four days and Martha isn't happy about it. She says, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died."

Jesus starts in on her about new life, "your brother will rise again," he says. "Spare me the piety, Jesus," replies Martha. "Sure, I know my brother will rise again, on the last day, in the resurrection. But what about now? My sister Mary and I, living in this world of patriarchy, all alone, now vulnerable, who will take care of us without our brother around Jesus? The family name is sealed in that tomb and we may as well have died with him."

But Jesus isn't spouting easy-answer "Chicken Soup for the Grieving" soul responses to the frightened sisters. He's not explaining away their pain and grief with pithy little sayings like, "God needed another angel in heaven and your brother fit the bill." Or, "we can never understand God's will." No, Jesus says, "I am the resurrection. I am the life."

In other words, we're not going to have some abstract, philosophical, touchy-feel conversation about what the resurrection will be like at the last day, but rather, Jesus says to Martha, "right here, right now, I am as much resurrection and life as you are ever going to need."

And with that they go out to the cemetery, the land of death, where there is always much weeping. When Jesus arrived at Lazarus' grave, he too was overcome with the pain of it all. The gospel says he was "greatly disturbed in Spirit and deeply moved." A better translation might be that he felt as though his heart was being torn to shreds. Then Jesus began to weep. The resurrection and the life hates death. It disturbs him, rips his insides to pieces, causes tears to pour out of him. Jesus screams, "take away the stone." Practical Martha knows better. She says Lord, "he's been dead four days. Already there is a stench."

James Kay comments that the resurrection is not just something that happens to Jesus, it is an event that embraces all of us. Lazarus' death is real, Kay says. In this story, death is so real it has a stench.

And there is Jesus, the self-proclaimed resurrection and the life, standing in a graveyard, a place engulfed with the smell of death, and through his own sobs, he cries: "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth." And Jesus says, "unbind him and let him go." According to John's gospel, that's how life deals with death. Jesus the life unbinds death and lets it go. Just like that, Lazarus is standing in the presence of the resurrection. Lazarus is alive.

Now one might expect Lazarus to embrace Jesus, cry out with thanksgiving that he has been brought back from the grave. Open his arms to the sky and give thanks for the light that has broken into his darkened tomb.

Apparently, however, Lazarus doesn't say anything of note. Four days in the blackness of death, raised to new life, and not one word from Lazarus is recorded in John's gospel.

Even more shocking, Lazarus isn't given a choice in the matter. Nobody asked him whether he wanted to be summoned forth from his cozy little tomb to face the world again. It may well be that Lazarus preferred the safety of his tomb, rather liked keeping the world at a distance and the bandages that covered his eyes. Perhaps Lazarus didn't even know he was dead.

In 1921, William Butler Yeats wrote a little play called *Calvary*. The play depicts Lazarus as being indignant to Jesus when he walks out of the tomb. Angry even. The tomb was comfortable. He knew who he was in the tomb. For the first time in his existence he had four days just to be dead, no light, no love, no sorrow, no beauty, no tragedy. Just dead. Then the life shows up, with a scream shrill enough to wake the dead, the resurrection calls him out of his comfortable hole into the light. Yeats puts the following words into Lazarus' mouth as he comes out of the tomb to face the one who had raised him. Lazarus says: "You took my death, give me your death instead." Jesus responds, "I gave you life." No, says Lazarus,

"I asked for death. Alive I never could escape your love,
And when I sickened towards my death I thought,
"I'll go 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;"

Lazarus, you see, is just like us. He enjoys the tomb. When it comes to the realities of the harsh world outside, he'd rather be kept in the dark. He feels more comfortable being closed off, safely confined, not bothered by what's happening outside his own little enclave. It's easier to deal with existence when the world and all its pain and injustice are locked out.

I understand the 6:30pm SportsCenter on ESPN is one of the most highly rated shows on television that time of day. Why? Because SportsCenter doesn't rub your nose in the problem's of the world the way the CBS Evening news with Bob Sheifer does. On

ESPN, there are no American soldiers dying by the side of Iraqi roads, or images of Syrian troops flooding into Lebanon, or word of the growing gap between the rich and the poor.

Those stories don't make SportCenter's top ten. And that's why ESPN is so beloved. We much prefer to stay sealed up in the tomb. But Jesus won't rest until with Lazarus, we are brought into the light, dragged from our holes, our insulating bandages torn away.

A couple of weeks ago the Muslim Student Association sponsored a Sudan awareness week, the capstone of the week was a community-wide discussion of the Sudan genocide and how we, members of the Duke community, might do something about it. I understand only a few people showed up. Why? My guess is that everyone was the same place I was, over at Cameron, taking in the basketball game. I suspect Jesus would say, "the moment basketball becomes more important than genocide, we're as good as dead." In the face of death, Jesus shows up. Jesus weeps. Jesus is greatly disturbed. His heart turns to shreds. We, on the other hand, adapt, and go about our business.

Yesterday, a group of Duke students from this Chapel, on a spring break mission team down in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, visited a tomb of sorts, a sacred place of weeping, memory, and life. It is the same place our mission team went last year, and the year before that, and the year before that. Constructed mostly by grieving women, it is a place that gives life to their dead brothers, and husbands, and sons.

Between 1980 and 1989, Honduras, a sleepy little Central American country found itself on the front lines of the Cold War. The United States was using military bases in Honduras to aid anti-communist rebels across the border in El Salvador. In the span of those nine years, hundreds of young Hondurans, mostly college-educated professionals, vocal opponents of their own government's involvement in the Cold War and relationship with the United States, simply disappeared. One day they were there the next day they were gone. These mostly young men have come to be known succinctly as "the disappeared." Sometimes the bodies were found, but most of them have never been recovered. The world pretended they didn't exist. That they had in fact disappeared, vanished, merely forgotten, that is until their sisters, mothers, wives, and grandmothers wouldn't stand for it anymore.

These strong women began to protest in the streets of Tegucigulpa, in front of the Presidential Palace, carrying the pictures of their brothers and husbands and sons, marching through the capital, reminding the world of their beloved dead, bodies locked in some stone cold unmarked tomb. Ever so slowly the world began to listen. Human rights groups started intervening. The number of disappeared decreased; a few bodies were recovered. And now there is a sacred place in downtown Tegucigulpa, dedicated to the memory of the disappeared, their pictures hanging on the walls, out in the open where they can be seen, their lives unlocked from the tombs.

I remember reading a love letter from 1982 in that place last year, a note from a young husband, a social activist protesting his country's all too cozy relationship with my own government, to his new bride. It was the last she ever heard of him. He disappeared soon after it was written. I would have preferred to stay dead, in the tomb with the bandages on, but Jesus wouldn't have it.

Christians are those peculiar people who follow the life that refuses to stay in the tomb, the numbing dead end tomb of darkness, solitude and apathy, the tomb that keeps the world and all its problems at bay.

It doesn't take a PhD in New Testament to discern that the raising of Lazarus is a pre-Easter story, a foreshadowing of what is about to happen two weeks from now. Sure, Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb, but the price he pays is that he'll have to go into it. Jesus himself will become one of those disappeared. The powers of death, the brass at the pentagon, the religious establishment, the fickle crowds, those who want the world to stay just like it is, will put Jesus in a tomb, hoping he might just go away. Easter morning, you see, isn't merely about sunlight, lilies and trumpets. For on that morning, Jesus will storm out of the grave and back into the world, and like it or not, bandages and all, kicking and screaming, those of us who follow Jesus will be dragged out of our own sheltered tombs and into the world of resurrection and life. Amen.