

Sermon ✝ March 26, 2023

John 11:1-45

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You probably have one at your house—perhaps a drawer or a shelf in the hall closet. Maybe it's a box tucked away in some obscure corner of the attic. It's that not-so-secret place where you save things, things you're really not sure what to do with.

Whatever and wherever it is, we usually have some place set aside where we hide away all sorts of things: grocery store coupons, bits of string, thumbtacks, old letters and postcards we meant to answer but never did, that 4-in-1 specialty tool that was never right for one job, much less four, things we want to forget on purpose, odds and ends we feel might be useful one day . . . all those items we ought to get rid of but can't.

For one reason or another we keep hanging onto that stuff, even though we never get around to using it all. Cluttering up the house and gathering dust, it all remains in that drawer or closet until we forget we have it or until we accidentally find it while looking for something else.

You probably have one at your house: a place to hide things, a place to keep things you're not sure what to do with.

Unfortunately, we manage to do the same sort of thing with our lives as well. We shuffle the odds and ends of our lives—the things we're not sure what to do with, the things we want to forget on purpose, the things we feel have no purpose—we shuffle all of it into that place, some dark, obscure corner of the soul.

And there it stays, because we're really not sure what to make of it all. Perhaps that's where today's story can be of help.

Lazarus, Mary, and Martha were among Jesus' closest friends. Their house in Bethany was a warm place where he could get away from it all, and there he spent many a moment. Jesus loved them, and they loved him.

So, it comes as no surprise that when Lazarus' health takes a turn for the worse, the sisters send for Jesus. We all know what happens when Jesus gets there: Lazarus, who has been dead four days, is brought back to life. Jesus is the giver of life.

The power of God in Christ is such that he can restore life to what is dead. Even those who are in the clutches of death are not beyond his power. And that leads us to our lesson.

If Jesus can do all that, why would he need anyone to take away the stone from Lazarus' grave? Couldn't he have done it himself? Of course, the answer to that question is an obvious yes.

But here is the point: God does God's greatest work with our cooperation, with our involvement, with our participation. Our God is one who has chosen to work with God's creation.

God doesn't expect us just to believe in miracles; God wants us to be miracles.

Think back to the story of the Exodus. Surely God could have freed Israel from bondage in Egypt without any help at all. But what does God do? God calls Moses and tells him *"I am sending you to Pharaoh. You are going to lead my people out of Egypt. I am going to do something great, and I want you to be in on it."*

We marvel at what God did to lead his folks to freedom, but we also marvel at what God did with Moses the man.

Before the stammering, stuttering shepherd Moses became Moses the great leader and lawgiver, he had to deal with Moses, with himself and all of his reservations and objections.

God wanted to work with Moses and Moses had to learn to cooperate. Our God is one who has chosen to work with God's creation.

God doesn't expect us just to believe in miracles; God wants us to be miracles.

And it is just what God asks here that is most often our task: get involved, cooperate, take away the stone. Take away the stone, and let what you've buried come out.

It is only when we take away the stone that God is able to work and bring what is buried to life. Martha objects to having the stone rolled away from the tomb (and for good reason) Lazarus has been dead four days — he's already long gone.

No doubt all of us have endured moments and events that have seemed hopeless. Common to all are those times when we feel as though we have to look up just to see the bottom. Hope, like Lazarus, is long gone, and there just doesn't seem to be any way out.

All of us are on the lookout for something to hope for and look forward to, whether it's next year's vacation or an income tax refund. Having something to hope for helps us live. When we're robbed of hope, life falls apart, and something in us dies. When that happens, we bury the pieces.

Unsure of what to do with our shattered dreams, we store them, pack them away somewhere and leave them. Take away the stone! Roll away the stone, and call those things into the light. God can work with the things we have given up on if only we will dare to bring them out.

Maybe we're not sure what God can do with our old, dead hopes. The truth of the matter is that we'll never find out unless we take away the stone. It's equally important for us to roll the stone away from our talents and abilities.

Each of you is gifted as no one else is. God gave you special gifts, and God needs you to do God's work in this world. Some of you have the gift of encouragement. Others have the gifts of love and faith. Some have the gift of help and simply do good to others. The truth of the matter is that you are gifted, you are important, you have something to offer.

Take away the stone! Own up to what God has given you, and put those talents to use. There are some things God cannot accomplish without you.

The story is told of a Catholic priest who had as a parishioner an elderly lady named Minnie. Unfortunately, Minnie lived in a rest home, and her mind wasn't what it used to be. In fact, she sometimes became so disoriented that she would take the receiver of the pay phone and carry on extended conversations with imaginary friends, all the while convinced that the calls were real. Other residents complained that she tied up the phone. One worker hit upon a solution: they bought Minnie a toy phone. She was able to talk to her heart's delight.

One day the priest looked in on her, and after visiting for a good amount of time, had to leave. Minnie, however, was talking nonstop, and he found it difficult to break in. Finally, he pointed to her toy phone and said, "*Minnie, your phone is ringing I'd better go and let you talk.*" With that he slipped out the door and started down the hall. He hadn't gone but a few steps when Minnie appeared at his side, her phone in her hand and a wink in her eye. She said, "*It's for you!*"

*"It's for you!"* Take away the stone! The call of God is for you. Take away the stone!

God can handle your guilt.

God can handle your bitterness!

God can handle your pain!

God can love you, no questions asked!

But, it's up to you to take away the stone!