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Lent 5A
John 11:1-45

Come Out

As Lent draws to a close and we find ourselves on the brink of Holy Week, we encounter the famous story of the raising of Lazarus. It is undoubtedly a dramatic, inspiring, and let's admit it: BIZARRE – tale ... especially if you watched any 'zombie apocalypse' shows!

Be that as it may, this was never really a *happy* story. It was always meant to be unsettling and maybe even a little disturbing. DEAD PEOPLE do not JUST GET UP out of their graves! And just so that we would fully understand HOW dead Lazarus was, John tells us he was in the tomb 4 days. First century Jews believed that the soul left the body after 3 days – so John, a Jewish writer - is saying that Lazarus was REALLY, REALLY dead! John also wants us to understand that the raising of Lazarus is NOT about the fully transformed, glorified resurrection that Jesus – and we, and Lazarus – will undergo. No. The raising of Lazarus is the final, and most dramatic HEALING STORY in John's Gospel. Lazarus is restored, whole and well, to THIS mortal life. We know he will die again, and indeed the shadow of death immediately begins to stalk him AND Jesus, precisely because of this healing. In the next few verses we are told that because of this healing, the authorities start plotting the execution of Jesus, and the murder of Lazarus too.

What was so threatening about the healing of Lazarus - this man whose name means '*Son of Aaron*,' (as in the priest and brother of Moses)? What was so disturbing about the GOOD NEWS from Bethany – not the scenic Delaware beach town, but the village above the Mount of Olives whose name means '*House of the Afflicted*'?

There are so many layers of meaning in this story. We only have time to focus on a few. Suffice it to say, that sometimes either we, or the people, or the society around us, would rather keep things the way they are, no matter how painful, than face changing them. Sometimes we would rather allow things that hurt, oppress, or even deaden us, to endure than risk changing the hurt, healing the suffering, or breaking the pain. Sometimes, in our overwrought exhaustion or simple jadedness, we prefer the status quo. There are many reasons why we don't address human trafficking, climate change, income inequality, or war crimes; but lethargy and sloth are as much among them as greed, ignorance and selfishness. As the saying goes, 'better the devil you know than the devil you don't know.' If his actions show us anything, Jesus would not be a fan of this saying!

But in the face of this, John tells us this final healing story as if to say: THERE IS ANOTHER OPTION. Jesus enters this drama of suffering and grief with the power to create NEW CONDITIONS ON THE GROUND. His words, "Lazarus, COME OUT" are a clarion call to new life. Just as in Genesis, when God says, 'Let there be light' and so it happens – Jesus speaks new life into a place it DOES NOT EXIST. The emptiness of space and the emptiness of the tomb ARE BOTH places for God's creative, healing, life-giving touch.

In John's Gospel, this is the last miracle Jesus performs before his execution. It even seems to trigger that process. He himself is about to take Lazarus' place, OUR PLACE, in a dark tomb. God's love for us is so profound, that Jesus enters EVERY DEPTH of pain and loss, himself, in order to give us a WAY OUT. He does this so he can look us, YOU AND ME, squarely in the eye, CALL US BY NAME, and say: COME OUT! Come out of that pain, because I am bearing it with you. Come out of that oppression, because I will walk that brave path alongside of you. Come out of that tomb, because a new way to live awaits you. But make no mistake about it; *life will never be the same again*. You may

resist the change. Others may even prefer the old you: hurt, suffering or oppressed. That's because the healing Jesus offers CHANGES THINGS! And that may be wonderful, but it is also scary, and certainly threatening to the way things are. Anyone who has ever emerged from addiction KNOWS THIS FIRS^THAND. Expect resistance. Expect sabotage. But we should also know this: the One who calls us out of our tombs, out of our dead-ends, will not leave us standing there alone. We who follow Jesus have a job to do: "Unbind him" Jesus says, "And let him go." That is what the Church is for; that is why the Church exists: to cooperate and collaborate with Christ's healing work.

For those of us trying to follow Christ, THIS is our job: to let God's grace go free wherever we see it at work. Oh yes, there will be push back. The ***myth of the way things are*** is very powerful. But we have a DIFFERENT story to tell, and it is about a much greater power. Paul reminded the Romans that the Spirit who raised Jesus gives power to us too (Rom 8:11). And the Prophet Ezekiel captured the human predicament and our deliverance this way:

They say 'our bones are dried up and our hope is lost ... '(but) God says, 'O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you back ... I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live...' (Ez 37:11-14)

In one way or another, WE ALL live in Bethany – DWELLERS IN THE HOUSE OF THE AFFLICTED. But Jesus stands in front of us today, calling to us: "COME OUT OF THERE!"