

“But If You Had Only Been Here!”
A Fifth Sunday in Lent;
John 11:1-45; April 2, 2017
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

I. Run the Film in Reverse

A preacher reflects on his childhood:

When I was a child I used to love walking into Miss Hammond's 4th grade classroom to discover the shades drawn and a 16 mm projector set up facing the pull-down screen. This was more than the joy of knowing I wouldn't be asked to answer questions, read aloud, or work out problems on the black-board.

For when there was time following the movie, rather than rewind the film, Miss Hammond would show the picture in reverse.

We laughed hysterically at the antics produced on the screen: things which had disintegrated, suddenly were reconstituted, buildings shaken to pieces by earthquakes took previous shape before our eyes, people who had been knocked to the ground suddenly sprang back to life.

That is what this bible lesson is about today -- God's power to run the film in reverse, to reverse the initiatives of infinitude, to overcome the gravity of life, to address a problem in life which you and I cannot solve.

II. LAZARUS, MARY & MARTHA—REVERSE!

Dear Mary, Martha and Lazarus needed a “rewind.” Another chance at the movie. To put that reel of the last few days on the projector and run it in reverse. How often do we wish *we* could do that? Regardless of how our modern technology has advanced way beyond 16 mm films and film strips?

If we could *only* go back and change the last few days. Even years. If *only* things had played out differently. If we had done things in a different order. If circumstances had been different. If our loved one hadn't died.

And now, Lazarus is in the tomb. The mourners have gathered all around. The word has gone out—the Master sent for. Actually, Jesus was sent for while Lazarus was still with us. “Your friend that you love is ill.”

And.... Jesus doesn't come.

Well, certainly not quickly!

Jesus waits two days, after hearing the news, before he sets out for Bethany and the home of his friends who are beside themselves in grief. Why?! This may be one of *the* hardest to understand sentences in all of scripture.

“And Jesus stayed there two days longer.”

III. FAITH AND DOUBT

Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever “sent for the Master;” cried out to Jesus, and no word comes back? No quick response. No sudden, miraculous presence? Only a pause, a silence—of the most painful, empty, kind?

And then, later, when things finally start moving, we may, like Martha, not be feeling too gracious:

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

We sang of this soul-wrenching moment, this plea from the depths in our Call to Prayer a few moments ago, “Need You Now.”

How many times have you heard me cry out
"God please take this"?

How many times have you given me strength to
Just keep breathing?

Oh I need you. God, I need you now.

Standing on a road I didn't plan
Wondering how I got to where I am
I'm *trying* to hear that 'still small voice'
I'm *trying* to hear above the noise
How many times have you heard me cry out
God please *take* this?

When we find ourselves in the depths. In despair, amid loss of hope. In the death of a tomb or a long, winding path in the Wilderness, we need to know God is there. We need our faith to be there for us. And honestly, we may need a new kind of faith. A new breadth and depth to our own understanding—when we find ourselves “on a road we didn’t plan.”

When it *seems* at least that God is “slow to respond.” When we have cried out, “God please take this!”
When we are mad and hurt and disappointed in our faith and cry out: “God, if you had *only* been here!”
“What *took* you so long?! What were you thinking—waiting two days?!”

IV. GOD ABSENT—DARK NIGHT

Thomas Moore, in *Care of the Soul*, and other Christians mystics, speak of times like these—even entire chapters of life or stages in our faith journey—when God is just absent. Gone. Tarrying. Not showing up for days. When we find ourselves in the house, weeping and angry, rather than watching for Jesus on the road.

Moore posits that those times—of suffering a lost faith or no faith—the “dark night of the soul” times, are the episodes when, if we can “go into the tomb” and put down the “spiritual elements” we have been *clinging* to and defining our faith by, that a new truer, deeper, more substantive faith can emerge—not based on the “outward facts” and the calendar we have put God on.

He says, “There is a Job-like mystery in human suffering and loss that can’t be comprehended with reason. It can only be

lived in faith. Suffering forces our attention toward places we would normally neglect.”

“When we are forced to look at our own hearts *without* any “spiritual props” or lenses [we] learn that faith comes not *only* from the spiritual heights, but also from the depths, a starkly impersonal reality from the most *personal* place. We learn, like the mystics, that we have to arrive at that difficult point where we don’t know what is going on or what we can do. That precise point is an opening to *true* faith.” (*Care of the Soul*)

V. WHERE STUCK IN THE TOMB?

When we find ourselves in those places, we are, quite literally, “**in the tomb.**” And we might feel very stuck there. For *far* more than 4 days, waiting for Jesus to jolly well show up.

Last week we reflected—together and in our own hearts—about “being stuck” in many ways—in old identities, bound by labels for ourselves that were keeping us in the past –unable to move forward into a bright, light-filled, sight-filled future.

We wrote down on papers some descriptor of ourselves in the past that we wanted to overcome or leave behind. An identity that has described us before—maybe our whole lives—but we no longer need. Something that is not serving a life-giving purpose, or limiting us too much in the here and now.

If you missed last week, you can *still* do the assignment! If you were here, but you’d slept since then, and have forgotten to go back and find your slip of paper and review your notes, you can still do that too! Remember, we said this wasn’t a one-time pop quiz, and would take reviewing and reflecting over and over in order to let go of an old descriptor and cast it decisively into the past. What *was* that past descriptor or label or issue that’s holding you back ; keeping you from being all who God calls you to be?

VI. WHAT UNBINDING?

And today, with Lazarus, we take that question one step further: Where are we “stuck in the tomb?” Maybe even stuck

so bad that a stench has started to creep in? What grave cloths do we need help unbinding, shedding off?

With Mary and Martha, full of frustration and doubt, could we be stuck, wrapped in cloths of old ideas of what faith itself looks like? What the “effectiveness of prayer” means anyway?

Is it possible that some of the grave cloths—the bindings—we need to shed off are our old, limited ideas of prayer, of faith, of timelines, of belief in God?

For sometimes God *doesn't* show up when we need Her. Or where we *expect* to find Him. Sometimes Jesus just plain fails to meet our demands. To come and our beckon call.

VII. WHAT NEEDS SHEDDING OFF

Last week, the sun came out and the horses told us it was time for their Spring trip to the Beauty Parlor. Horse grooming includes a special kind of brush called a “shedder.” (No, not a shredder! Though, that could come in handy at other times and places. Maybe that’s a “whole ‘nother” sermon!)

The shedder must feel like the *best* scratch ever, as the little metal teeth dig down and get that winter coat and send it off into the breeze. The horses love to get set free of their cumbersome winter coat, and what’s even better? The birds *love* to swoop down and grab those little tufts of hair and take them home to build their nests.

I love this fact of nature! It’s truly the cycle of life—reduce, reuse, recycle. What is shed off, cast away by one soul, is the building block of a new home for another!

VIII. A NEW IDEA OF FAITH

What might this new home look like for us—this “new faith” we find when we cast off the grave cloths of the old one that wasn’t working for us.? That faith that was dismantled and deconstructed when our prayers and requests weren’t answered according to our timetable?

Henri Nouwen reminds us that de-constructing our idea of prayer and our image of God goes hand-in-hand with *re*-constructing and finding a new faith.

"To pray is to listen attentively to the One who addresses us here and now. When we dare to trust that we are never alone but that God is always with us, always cares for us, and always speaks to us, then we can gradually detach ourselves from the voices that make us guilty or anxious and thus allow ourselves to dwell in the present moment.

This is a *very* hard challenge because radical trust in God is not obvious. Most of us *distrust* God. Most of us think of God as a fearful, punitive authority or as an empty, powerless nothing. Jesus' core message was that God is neither a powerless weakling or a powerful boss, but a lover, whose only desire is to give us what our heart most desires."

IX. RUNNING THE FILM IN REVERSE

We have to run the film in reverse. Go into the tomb, sit awhile—waiting and wondering if God is going to show up and save us—if this is all there is. And *while* there, look at things from all different angles—forward, backward. Look at angles we have not *seen* before—either by our own blindness or because the projector just plain doesn’t show those different angles unless it—and life—are approached a different way.

A foolish, reverse, everything-a-little-crazy-and-far-from-normal way. God who “chooses the foolish to shame the wise.” God, who is a God of reversal. Who can put our pieces back together, reverse the trend, bring life to stinky places where there was only death before.

We have to work with God to build, together, the new, homey nest of our faith. Know that God weeps with us, is greatly disturbed alongside us—not a punitive judge, chastising us in our doubt, but a distraught lover of our souls. In the tomb with us, but also calling us forth, telling our friends to unbind the cloths and death dealings, and set us free—into the sunshine!

JOHN 11:

³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹ So they took away the stone.

And Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

X. SPEAK LIFE!

And in that moment, Jesus speaks life into the place of death! He orders Lazarus to come out into the light, the sunshine! To walk out of the stinky, stuck, going nowhere place and to choose life and movement forward. Then he tells the friends to unbind him! "Help him out here, guys!"

Jesus speaks life to the death of the tomb and tells the community gathered 'round to do the same for each other. Speak life! Speak life, to the deadest darkest night. We will sing to one another at the close of worship in a few minutes:

SPEAK LIFE

So speak life, speak life
To the deadest darkest night

Speak life, speak life

When the sun won't shine and you don't know why
Look into the eyes of the broken hearted
Watch them come alive as soon as you speak hope
You speak love, you speak.....You speak life!

For we are the voice, the hands and feet of Jesus when we speak life into one another's tombs. When we help to unbind one another from that which holds us stuck and wrapped. *This homework is a Group Project!*

XI. COMING TO THE WELCOME TABLE

And now, come forth and eat! Come and drink from the cup of life. The Well that never runs dry. Come and taste the bread that IS life—for you, for me, for the whole world.

Speak life! Nourishment, staff of life. The Last Supper was not a funeral meal but a Heavenly Banquet—on both sides of the grave.

As we gather around the Table, where every soul is welcome, let us pray:

You are above us, O God,
you are within.

You are in all things

yet contained by no thing.

Teach us to seek you in all that has life
that we may see you as the Light of life.

Teach us to search for you in our own depths that we
may find you in every living soul.

(Newell-from *Sounds of the Eternal: A Celtic Psalter*, p2.)