

Jesus raises Lazarus. John 11:1-45. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods. 4/5/14 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Today we have another long, very rich gospel passage from John. It fits in with the ones that have preceded it – it succeeds them and expands on them. So I think it's worth a very quick review of what came before.

First we heard the story of Jesus and Nicodemus – the classic insider, the religious institutionalist, the teacher, the one who should have gotten Jesus and what he was preaching, but didn't at all. He went away without being changed in any way.

Then we heard of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well - she did understand, went away a different person, and came back with her whole village. While she did come back there's no evidence she became one of Jesus' disciples.

Last week we heard the story of the man born blind healed by Jesus. He understood, he was transformed, he was baptized, and he expressed a desire to become a disciple.

And that brings us to Lazarus. All three of the previous stories worked on multiple levels, with the deeper ones being consistently the most profound and important. That truth is a reminder to us to avoid getting caught up in the outward, surface language around Lazarus' resurrection, which isn't easy – even with a literalist reading it's a great story! But taking the story of Lazarus on the surface level would be a little like trying to explain what's going on with the story of Humpty Dumpty by talking about the surface tension of an egg when exposed to stress! And in case you wondered, the Humpty Dumpty story has variously been linked to Richard III (the "hunchback king") and an English Civil War artillery piece!

Like last week, the central core of this passage comes in just a few words. Last week it came at the front end: "who sinned, this blind man or his parents?". This week it comes at the end, and is this: "unbind him and set him free".

Why that's central is made clear in the fullness of the story.

It's a story that's a little different than the previous ones – in today's passage Jesus has a relationship with more than one person – not just with Nicodemus, or the woman at the well, or the man born blind – he has a relationship with a community: Martha AND Mary AND Lazarus and the people who have gathered to be supportive and to mourn. This event can only be centered on and in community – it's why we gather on Sundays as a community and not as individuals: because the community participates in and is a vehicle for transformation.

The clue to that focus is another passage – one John surely must have had in mind – is the oh so familiar passage from Ezekiel of the Valley of the Dry Bones, and, centrally God's question in Ezekiel – "Can these bones live?"

To answer that question – and, in fact, to understand why it's important, we have to consider the bones in the state God finds them: in the battlefield that's life these bones are the collateral

damage, they represent a community that had lost its sense of self, lost its spirit, lost its sense of hope. The bones represent a community in exile from itself – quite literally in Ezekiel’s terms, because he was talking about The Exile in Babylon.

When a community goes into that sort of exile it loses its sense of identity as something held in common – it stops being a community and simply becomes a whole mess of individuals, working at no purpose or at cross-purposes – a jumble of bones, perhaps, with no flesh, no meatiness in living, and – thinking forward to the story of Lazarus – that sort of community can’t participate in any experience of transformation, can’t be a vehicle for transformation because it actually *isn’t* a community at all.

In our own lives we’re often challenged by the ways in which our culture invites us to live in exile – from ourselves, from each other, even from God. There’s so much in our world today that can seduce us away from a true sense of community.

But the problem is this: without a true sense of community we’re as good as dead, we’re like the dry bones, and what clearly happens to dry bones is that they get buried, they end up in the grave – literally and figuratively.”

“Can these bones live?” The words don’t mean “is it possible for these bones – this very dead community – to live?” – rather the words are asking the bones themselves – the community itself – or rather, the individuals who are not living as a community – not “can you?” but “will you?” – will you live as a fully en fleshed community of faith? That’s a timeless question.

Today’s gospel makes it clear that we have to know that the question’s “in play”, we have to have some level of awareness that in some way we’re dead before we can answer yes or know for ourselves or for the community of which we’re a part. In today’s gospel Martha and Mary saw death only in someone else – someone they loved deeply. They didn’t see any death within themselves, and they didn’t see any power to combat that death in others. Hence their language that sounds like blame if it didn’t come from ones whose hearts were broken: “Lord, if you had been here.....” How many people of faith must be continuing to raise that plaintiff cry in the Oso-Darrington-Arlington community as we sit here?

In the face of death – literal in some cases, but more profoundly figurative in John’s story, more commonly figurative in our own – in the face of death we do tend to put the focus outside of ourselves. In today’s gospel we put the focus on the sisters – not the least because it’s easy to try and find our own hearts there. We look to Martha’s activist faith or Mary’s quieter intimate relationship with Christ for a reflection of ourselves. But I think perhaps we’re looking in the wrong place. Because mainly we’re all Lazarus.

We’re in the tomb and we’re bound up. In one way or another, we all need new life. Not just a sunnier day or a better vision for tomorrow. We need life. We need Christ to call us away from the grave – from all the ways that hate and death are manifest in our thinking and our living – and to breathe life back into us. All of us. Without that gift – the one Jesus offered Nicodemus – the Spirit that “blows where it will” there’s not much hope for us.

“Can these bones live?” Will these bones live? Will our bones live? As individuals AND as a community will these bones live?

When we are able – and willing – to answer yes, then Jesus’ command “unbind him and set him free” can be heard by all of us. Dead people can’t unbind other dead people. The absence of community for us would mean we would be unable to take on the ministry of unbinding that Jesus gave to those around Lazarus...and to us. Only in the context of community can we become the unbinders

But it’s more than that. In community we can free – we can unbind – each other. And our community, and the world, and creation; and we can be unbound by others, we can be recipients of that unbinding.

At the heart of this unbinding is love. Being raised from all the sorts of death that lie like pits in front of our human journeying entails the existence of a community dedicated to loving one another in the liberating love of Jesus Christ. Remember the dry bones - they said “we are completely cut off”. Cut off from home, from community, and, especially, cut off from God and God’s love. That love is on display in John’s story. It’s the love that’s devastated by death – for the only time in all of the gospels Jesus is totally undone by the news of Lazarus’ death. It’s the love that can bear that devastation and overcome it, a love so powerful that it has the strength to unbind death’s powerful shackles.

Those who are preparing for baptism in this Lenten season – which, I’ve said all along, is really all of us – now face the final footsteps of their/our journey.

Why believe in Jesus? Perhaps a better question is this: “why follow Jesus?” This story – and all the ones that have preceded it – give an answer which I find compelling: because in a community that has committed itself to living in a certain way, embracing particular behaviors and practices, most especially a central focus on God’s love made real in each one of us and all of us together – in all of those things I see life and love and hope: new life, transformed life, life rooted in God and God’s love, and hope in times of travail and loss, hope in moments of joy and relationship. May it be so for you!