

An Untimely Death

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

First Congregational United Church of Christ

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Dale L. Bishop

Text: John 11:17-45

You have probably heard the term “C and E Christians,” meaning Christmas and Easter Christians. While pastors and other church members would prefer that people come to church more often, I’m always happy to see people whenever they come to church, so Christmas and Easter are just fine. They’re the biggies, after all.

They’re big because their significance is universal, even cosmic. They tell us of the profound truths of our faith—incarnation and resurrection— truths that apply to God’s relationship with each of us and with humanity in general. But faith isn’t only expansive and universal in its implications; it’s also intimate and personal. So, while they certainly aren’t among the best-attended services, the two services that are for me the most heart-rending, the ones that speak to me in ways that prompt the deepest emotions are the little intimate services that frame Lent: Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday. Perhaps it’s because both of these services speak not only to our intellects, through our hearing and understanding of the Word, but they also speak to us through our senses.

On Ash Wednesday, we are literally touched as we receive the ashes of repentance, even as we hear those unsettling words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” For a pastor it’s a moment of profound and awesome intimacy. We are reminding people that we love, the very old and the very young, and at every stage in between, and we are reminding ourselves, that we are all mortal, that we all will taste death. It is with the reminder that we will die that we live our way through Lent. On Ash Wednesday, we’re driven down to the basic realities of life and death.

And then, at the other end of Lent, we join Jesus at his Last Supper. On the eve of his crucifixion, we are given absolution for our sins, even as we contemplate our own persistent betrayal of the Lord of our lives. We share that supper to which Jesus has invited us, his disciples, and then as we read of Jesus’

last hours, the sanctuary is gradually reduced to darkness. And then the light of Christ is removed from our sanctuary, and the sanctuary becomes his tomb awaiting the glory of Easter morning. There is a terrifying intimacy in this drama. We may say that Jesus died for our sins, but on Maundy Thursday that death seems very personal. There is just that solitary man, Jesus. Alone. Alone against the Empire. Alone against the religious establishment. Alone. Abandoned.

Today's lesson from the Gospel of John is the familiar story of the raising of Lazarus from his tomb. While Jesus' death and resurrection have cosmic implications, the Lazarus story is a story about the death and resurrection of a man who died an untimely death, a man who was a dear friend of Jesus. It's about the drama of death among people whose home Jesus frequented. Jesus went to this home to get away from the crowds; to kick back and relax, to enjoy good food and stimulating conversation. In this home he gently chided Lazarus' sister Martha for her obsessive housecleaning and food preparation while her sister Mary was "just talking." In this home, Mary bathed Jesus feet with her tears and with expensive perfume. If we can't imagine Jesus enjoying this kind of easy friendship with people, we need to reconsider how we think of Jesus. Jesus, after all, told us that in his eyes we are not his servants, or his students. We are his friends.

And into this friendship, as it comes into all of our friendships, the reality of death intruded. Lazarus died. And his death occasioned all the grief, and, yes, all the "if only's" that accompany so many deaths. "If only you had been here," both of Lazarus' sisters said to Jesus in separate conversations. "If only I'd been there," I said to myself when my best friend in the world died some years ago, and I arrived at his New York apartment an hour too late to say goodbye. When the sisters said their "if only's" to Jesus, they were acknowledging faith in Jesus' healing power, it's true, but there was also more than a faint note of reproach amid their tears. "Didn't we tell you that he was dying? What took you so long to get here?" And Jesus, we're told, was "deeply troubled." Actually, the Greek is more eloquent than that rather pale translation suggests. The Greek says that Jesus "shook with grief," shook as we shake in the utter desolation of loss when someone dear to us dies. And Jesus wept. Not a quiet, discrete tear, but the uncontrolled sobs of someone who has had a part of their very being ripped away. Jesus, we're reminded again, is one of us—not a haughty and remote abstraction, but a human being who cries our tears.

It's a powerful account of a man's reaction to the untimely death of a close friend. But, as is true of all the stories about Jesus in the Gospel of John, the specific and this-worldly tells us about the universal

and eternal. So, Nicodemus is Nicodemus, but he's also people like us who go to church, but who have our questions. The woman at the well is the woman at the well, but she's also every one of us who has ever felt excluded, who has ever been on the wrong side of respectability, but who discovers what it's like to be known and loved by Jesus. The blind man whose sight Jesus restored is a nameless blind man, but he's also all of us who wander around in the fog of delusion until Jesus gives us the gift of insight. And Lazarus is Lazarus, but he's also every one of us who has suffered an untimely spiritual death, who lives in the darkness of the tomb of a life that is not life. And when we have died in this way, we grieve God's heart and Jesus weeps.

Jesus led his entourage of Lazarus' family and friends to the tomb. "What's the point, Jesus?" Martha asked. "He's been dead for four days, and you really don't want to be there. The body has begun to decompose—there will be a very unpleasant odor." The King James Version doesn't gloss it over. "He stinketh," is how those refined scholars rendered Martha's verdict.

"What's the point?" we may ask about someone on whom we've given up, someone we've pronounced dead. In various religious traditions, when someone marries outside their inherited tradition, the family holds a funeral. "She's dead to us," they say. "Don't even go near to her. She stinketh. She's dead."

"He'll never change," despairing parents may say about a son who has disappointed them deeply.

Or we may have pronounced ourselves dead. "There's no point in going on with my life," people say in their sense of utter hopelessness and shame. "The best days are over, and now I'm useless," a retiree who has lost his sense of purpose may say. Or maybe we carry an intolerable burden of guilt around, and think that we should be dead even if we're biologically alive. "I'm just no good." And so we sink into the tombs we have dug out for ourselves, and we wait for the breath to leave us, because we know that our spirit has already left us. Guilt can be very comforting in its own perverted way. Guilt can deaden us to pain, and, alas, to everything else, including happiness and a sense of purpose and meaning; guilt can confer the comfort of immobility and relieve us of responsibility.

Notice that Jesus didn't enter Lazarus' tomb. He didn't go in there to drag him out and perform CPR on him. He stood outside the tomb and called to Lazarus. "Lazarus, come out!" Jesus called to Lazarus, just as he called out to the disciples when he first enlisted them as his followers. Jesus doesn't coerce us to follow him; Jesus calls us, invites us, to follow him. And we can either take him up on the offer or take a pass. At the origin of good and evil always there is a choice.

Imagine if Lazarus had said, “You know, Jesus, I’m tired. I think I’ll just stay in this tomb. It’s dark in here, but there is comfort in remaining in the dark.” It would be like our saying, “I’m too old to start following Jesus now; I’m too set in my ways. I’m basically resigned to being who I am at this point in my life. It’s boring, but it’s familiar. Just leave me alone.” But Jesus is always standing there, at the opening of our self-made tombs. “Come out! Come out into the light of day. Come out and start living again,” or, maybe, “Come out and live for the first time in your life.”

The friend whose passing I missed by an hour had, at an earlier time in his life, come out of his tomb, his closet, as a gay man. And it had been a painful, but ultimately liberating experience for him. After he had emerged from that tomb, he was no longer rotting away in the darkness of his secret. He had come out into the full light of honesty, and his life had started anew.

“Unbind him, and let him go.” Jesus told the friends and family of his dear friend Lazarus. Lazarus was Lazarus, but Lazarus is also each and every one of us who is given the opportunity, in Jesus, to escape the tombs that our lives have become. Lazarus eventually died, as we all will die. But his, presumably, was not an untimely death. He had been saved from death in life by a Jesus who loved him as the dearest friend he ever had—and each of us is precisely that: the dearest friend Jesus has ever had—and Lazarus tasted the new life that Jesus offered him.

The most familiar words of this account, not surprisingly, are words that we repeat at every funeral service. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” And then he turned to the grieving Martha, “Do you believe me, Martha?” And so I ask you, and I ask myself, “Do you believe him?” Do you believe that you can be saved from an untimely death by following Jesus, by emerging from your tomb even as you strip away all the things that have bound you, that have paralyzed you? It’s your choice. It’s really your choice. Next week, Jesus will enter Jerusalem. Will you be with him? Will you be there to witness his betrayal, his suffering, his death on the cross? And then, will you be ready to proclaim his resurrection, and then to live the new life he offers. Do you believe him? Do you really believe him? It’s your choice. Amen.