



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Leap of Faith

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 29, 2020
The Fifth Sunday in Lent
Based on Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-45*

God of compassion, you call us out of the bindings of death; make us ready to surrender our fears, and to step into your future, alive and full of hope. Amen.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is found only in the gospel according to John, and it is a distressing story. In the first place, it seems that Lazarus' death was untimely. He was a contemporary of Jesus', along with his sister Martha and Mary, which means that he was a young man—in his thirties, say—when he was struck down by a mysterious illness. We are told that Jesus loved the whole family, and yet when he received word that Lazarus was ill, he did not drop everything and rush to his friend's side. For one thing, Jesus was already in deep trouble with the authorities in Judea, where Lazarus and his sisters lived. If he returned, he was likely to be arrested. But beyond that, the message did not seem an urgent one. "Lord, he whom you love is ill," read the note from Martha and Mary. There was no obvious reason for Jesus to believe that the illness was life threatening, and certainly no warning that he should hurry.

For whatever reasons, Jesus arrived in Bethany two days later to find that his friend Lazarus *had* died, and had been lying in his tomb for four days. According to Jewish custom, this meant that Lazarus' body had begun to rot and that his soul had departed. Without knowing they did so, both Martha and Mary greeted Jesus with the same words: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Was bitterness in those words? Did they blame Jesus for the sudden, unexpected, tragic death? Or did they simply recognize that if he had been with Lazarus things would have turned out differently? But he was not, and Lazarus had been dead four days, and there was a lot of weeping on the part of those who were not ready to let him go.

Jesus' own response was puzzling. He was "deeply moved," the Bible says, but the word in Greek means more than that. It suggests that he not only was moved but angry, full of righteous indignation and ready to explode. He was angry? At whom? Biblical scholars say Jesus was angry because everyone was crying, which meant they had no faith in him, but that cannot be the whole story because in the next moment he too was weeping. Jesus wept, and it is my wild speculation that his tears were for the whole world, tears so full of anger and sadness that it was hard to tell where one left off and the other began. He wept tears for his friends Martha and Mary in their grief; tears over the loss of his friend Lazarus; tears about the frailty and unpredictability of life and the randomness with which it was snuffed out; tears that no one seemed to understand what he was about, much less believe it; tears over the enormity of what he had been given to do and how alone he was.

Then Jesus let Martha and Mary lead him to Lazarus' tomb. There is such strain in Jesus' voice as he instructs them to remove the stone that covers the tomb. Anticipation and tension build as profound faith and debilitating doubt converge. After thanking God for what is about to happen, Jesus bellows, "Lazarus, come out!" The cry reverberates throughout the tomb, awakening Lazarus' lifeless body.

Lazarus did come forth, stumbling out of his tomb wrapped in linen bandages, his face concealed by a cloth. “Unbind him,” Jesus said, “and let him go.” And that is all we know about Lazarus. Yanked from the jaws of death, the beneficiary of Jesus’ greatest miracle remains silent about the whole ordeal, drops from the scene, and is never mentioned again. Nevertheless, I am pretty confident that Lazarus did not ask for either his sudden death, nor his equally sudden return to life. And while novelists, poets, artists and playwrights have imagined a post-resurrection future for him, what everyone so far has either been too polite or too afraid to mention is that after all this—the days of pain and fever, the days of hearing his sisters weeping somewhere in the house, after everything it took for him finally to let go of his life and surrender to death—after all this, he has been hauled back into the light and *must do it all again*. Sooner or later Lazarus will be carried back into his tomb, and this time for good.

We all, finally, die. As ardently as we pray for healing and long life, as delighted as we are on the occasions when those prayers are granted, we all finally die and it is the darkest mystery each of us must face. Like Martha and Mary, we appeal to some power that will protect us from it. Like Jesus, we weep with the enormity of our sadness and anger at it. Like Lazarus, we find no words that can make sense of it. And is there anything in the world we would like better than to make sense of it all? To know why, when, and how we die, to know where death fits in the divine economy of things, to have reliable evidence that death is just a dark door into a brighter world where *everything* makes sense? If there is one word our hearts can be counted on to cry out when we are afraid, it is “Why?” As if understanding, or a very good reason would make our fear go away.

But it is not explanations we want, at least not for themselves; it is the security and sense of control those explanations might give us. Tell us why, God, and maybe we can offer a convincing argument why not. Tell us why, and maybe we can be so outraged by the answer that we decide to reject it and manufacture answers of our own. Tell us anything we can handle, tinker with, control, but do not ask us just to believe—believe what? *That everything will be all right*. How, exactly? *Just all right*. Please, God, give us something we can work with, something we can hold on to. Do not ask us to step out into the air without a net.

Every day and in every way, right now, we are stepping out without a net. We don’t know if things are going to be okay. So many of us are riding waves of anxiety built on riptides of no control. Every day, right now, we experience small and large deaths—physically, emotionally, financially, spiritually. We are inundated with news that can break the human heart and crush our spirits. We are, all of us, in a kind of free fall. We are physically apart, but united by the unprecedented uncertainty of this moment, and the awareness of our own fragility that this uncertainty has laid bare. What will become of us? Our health? Our livelihoods? Our siblings who have no food security or home in which to shelter in place? What’s next?

It is the ancient and ageless cry of the human heart: *Why me, why this, why now?* Don’t you care that we perish? Give us something to hold on to! My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?

These are bold words, bold questions to ask the Source of Life, but they are the truth of how we feel when we cannot make sense of what happens to us, when we are not given a reason. We feel abandoned, forsaken, but because the patriarchs and matriarchs and prophets and even Jesus himself have joined us in these words and feelings, they are not something we must hide. To have faith in God, to have faith that we are in good hands, to have faith that whether or not we understand it, the universe makes sense—that is the hardest choice any of us must ever make. To decide it is all true *is* to step out into the air without a net, because we have no proof, no evidence, nothing but the unyielding testimony of our own hearts that it is so. We simply give up the illusion that we are in control of our lives and step out. Which is why, perhaps, it is called a *leap* of faith.

In our leap of faith, we gather this very day to profess our belief in a God whose infinite love and compassion for us accompany us through the whole of life, even and especially the pain of loss and grief.

As people of faith, we can believe in a God who weeps with us, who grieves with us, who suffers with us. The loving power that is God insists unequivocally that death does not have the final word. We do not grieve as those who do not have hope. We can expect that God will call us out of tombs. We can anticipate being unbound and being called to unbind those long thought dead. Having seen other resurrections in our lives and in our world, we can dare to believe.

What and whom do we believe at a time such as this? Well, there was Ezekiel's miracle in the valley of dry bones, for one thing; and there was Lazarus for another, although as far as we can tell he never said anything at all. And then there was Lazarus' friend Jesus, who faced his own death with great uncertainty and fear but was willing to let go, to step out into the air without a net. Someone said they saw him later and that he talked about peace, about abundant and unending life, about how it had turned out there was nothing to fear after all. We need not fear this journey. Jesus meets us on the road, calls to us at home, insists that the stones that bar our tombs be taken away. He weeps with us, and he calls us to life anew. Resurrection is only the beginning. Amen.

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