

John 11:1-45

11Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.
2Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. 3So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."
4But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

5Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, 6after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. 7Then after this, he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." 8The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" 9Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. 10But those who walk at night stumble because the light is not in them."

11After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." 12The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." 13Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. 14Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. 15For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

16Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

17When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. 20When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. 21Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." 23Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 25Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" 27She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." 28When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." 29And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. 30Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.

31The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

33When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." 35Jesus began to weep. 36So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have

kept this man from dying?” 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 looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” 43 When he had said this, he 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.”

45 Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

This is the third in a series of long stories in which Jesus, moved by compassion, takes time to restore Lazarus to his family and people, declaring, “I am the resurrection and the life.” And he calls him out of his tomb.

The one thing that puzzles me is that Jesus is told that Lazarus is ill, and he waits two days before starting out. Then we hear Lazarus has died, and it is not clear if Jesus knew he was already dead or if the message he wanted to deliver required his delay. But his delay caused great grief and pain for Lazarus’ family, especially Mary and Martha, especially since Jesus was so close by. Just a few hours away.

The only thing I can think of is that his message was so vital that it required Lazarus to be dead for four days. So that, according to Jewish tradition, the soul has left the body, and there is certainty that Lazarus is dead. That seems to be the reason, but it still feels uncomfortable to me. It brought suffering, grief, and pain to so many.

But by the time he gets close to their home, Lazarus has been dead for four days, so there was no doubt in people’s minds that Lazarus was dead. He doesn’t seem dead or appear dead; he is actually dead.

When Jesus was some distance away from Lazarus’ home, Martha went out to confront him saying, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Anger and grief are combined as she speaks to Jesus, and Jesus receives her words. He doesn’t say “Don’t be angry.” or “Don’t cry.” he lets her tears of grief and rage flow. That is something we should remember when faced with such emotions. We need to be prepared to hold their emotions.

Martha is puzzled that Jesus could have saved him and didn’t, why?

Jesus tells her that Lazarus will rise again. She is confused, thinking Jesus is talking about a final resurrection, at the end of time, but Jesus is talking about the here-and-now. He is speaking of the gift of eternal life that is present now and into the future. It begins now and continues beyond the grave; it is a new quality of life Jesus makes available. It is heaven that begins on earth. It is a life we can all enjoy starting today. It is the nearness of the kingdom of God.

In their encounter, Jesus begins to speak of eternal life again, which begins right here and now rather than in the distant future. He interprets to her what he is about to do and tells her its meaning. He declares for all times, "I am the resurrection and the life, and those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." His raising of Lazarus will bear witness to his powerful message of the gift of life eternal. What a promise!

This is a change in outlook. Even for those who believed in the resurrection, it was seen as a totally after-death experience, at the end of time. But Jesus says it is so much more.

It is a new quality of life that embodies his teachings and life, and it begins right now. It is heaven beginning on earth, rooted in our solidarity and trust in Jesus.

Martha then calls for her sister to see Jesus, and while she is more worshipful than bitter, she is still hurt and grieving; she says, "If you only had been here, everything would have been okay."

Then many of the Jewish people from the village join Mary and Martha in weeping at the death of Lazarus. Jesus is also sobbing. He is moved to the depths of his being. His full humanity is on display as he grieves. He cries out in grief. He knows and shares our hurt as he feels the pain and grief of losing his beloved friend Lazarus.

Jesus loved many people, but only four are named in the gospels: Mary and Martha. Lazarus and the unknown disciple that Jesus loved. So three of his dear friends are hurting, and he pulls himself together and goes to the tomb for their sake as well as his. He's on a mission from God.

As Jesus goes to the tomb, some in the crowd deride him as they accuse him of failing to come on time to heal Lazarus. If he could restore sight to a person born blind, he could have healed Lazarus. At the same time, others remark on Jesus' great love for Lazarus.

Jesus then says a brief prayer to his Father and gives thanks for the opportunity to share the gospel message with these people, to reveal to everyone why he waited. He waited so that they might see an even greater miracle than healing from illness: The miracle of Lazarus' resurrection, and the new life he offers.

So Jesus commands that the stone be taken away, to which Martha replies, "He has been in the grave for four days; it will stink."

Jesus shouts, and the Greek words indicate it is a painful cry. Pain for his friends and his own pain. Lazarus, come out he shouts.

Lazarus does, and Jesus orders the people to unbind him, to remove the burial cloths.

This was what Jesus was driving at: a concrete way to show people that resurrection was for the here and now, and new life was possible for everyone now, and they don't have to wait for heaven. That is what life eternal is all about.

The themes of death and unbinding can tell us a lot about our own lives.

Where are the tombs of our lives that are filled with only grief and pain? Where does death and despair cast its shadow over us? Where are those places that Jesus is calling us to leave? Where are our caves of death that are keeping us from enjoying Jesus promised new life right now?

But a person experiencing this rebirth, coming out of their cave, is doing hard work. Sometimes there is more work than they can accomplish on their own. Those without hope would prefer to stay in their tomb rather than risk the new life Jesus promises.

It is why some things, like recovery programs, are so hard, even with newfound freedom. There are so many things summoning us back to our caves and graves, so many things and sometimes people that want to keep us down. So it is also with people suffering from abuse. It takes courage to leave, but that is what Jesus tells us to do as he calls us out of the caves and graves of our lives. People need support to find this new life. Notice that Jesus doesn't do everything; he calls Lazarus to new life but commands the people, "Unbind him." Remove whatever is restricting his life and growth. That is his call to us as well, to unbind him.

We are also challenged to allow others to unbind us as well as unbind others. It's like that part of the Serenity Prayer, asking for the courage to change the thing I can.

It is one reason we are in a community of faith, so that we might help each other live fully as our friends, and family unbind us, and we do the same for them. But remember this happens after Jesus calls us out; we must leave the tomb to be unbound.

It takes faith and courage on our part, but we don't have to do it alone. When someone, including you and me, comes out of their tomb, the command is to unbind them and help them discover new life. We need to find and accept that help.

This is more than just personal; it's about justice as well. Society, in many ways, is structured to serve those with wealth and privilege, even when that creates caves and binds our neighbors. Jesus reminds us that people do not belong in caves of death, and through many voices calls out for us to unbind them.

Jesus is still at work, calling people to new life. "Come out," he calls. "Unbind him!" He commands