

Lazarus, Displaced

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on John 11:17-45
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I.

I know I'm not the only one in this room that cut our Baptist teeth in children's Sunday School classrooms doing Bible drill, right? (I won't ask for a show of hands!) If "Bible drill" is a completely foreign idea to you, let me describe. As an activity for learning and knowing and internalizing the words of scripture in our hearts, kids would memorize verses of scripture, memorize the books of the Bible (in order!), memorize where to find important stories and passages of scripture. After all that memorizing, there would be a contest to show what you learned, and yes it did involve frantically flipping through pages of the Bible to press your finger confidently on the verse or passage or book requested, step forward, and recite it.

And among all that we memorized, again I'm sure I'm not the only one in here who started with the shortest and easiest verse in all of scripture to remember: "Jesus wept."

It shows up right here in today's text, though lengthened over years and scholarship to "Jesus began to weep." (I'm biased, but that just doesn't have the same ring to it!) It's a passage that invites our attention, not just because of a brief verse for eager elementary schoolers to learn. But because it reveals something deeper about the one with the tears and we who share them too.

II.

This story of the raising of Lazarus only appears in the gospels right here. It's a familiar story, if disturbing and rather odd, of a man that Jesus brought back to life! The oddness, though, isn't just in the resuscitation of a

dead body. Because after this most stunning of Jesus's miracles, we don't see or hear from Lazarus any more. There are no stories of people who come to sit at his feet, their curiosity overtaking them about those days in the tomb, what it must have felt like to die, and be dead, and then be alive again.¹ The text doesn't say what we might assume: that Lazarus becomes a folk hero in the town of Bethany, that he goes on to tell this story to anyone who'll listen. In these next days of Jesus's life, we won't find Lazarus beneath the cross, or at the tomb, or in the upper room, or walking the Emmaus Road, or on a beach, fishing at dawn. All these places where glimpses of resurrection changed everything? Those won't be his places, no matter how much his own life is stamped by resurrection. It's as if he's utterly displaced in this great after: dead and alive again, neither by his choice.

But before we get to the miracle, let's look for the displacement that happens before. Jesus's disciples were with him when he received word of Lazarus's illness, and their questions revealed their fears. Jesus was a wanted man in Judea, you see, and the authorities there were already suspicious of Jesus. One after the next, the disciples question his plan, unsure as to the next right step.

You can hear that same thread of displacement in the words from Lazarus's sisters, Mary and Martha. They'd sent word to Jesus of Lazarus's illness, they'd kept vigil by his side, they'd prayed and hoped and done everything they knew to do, and still he died. Disoriented, one right after the next, their statements declare the truth, their anger and lament right in the midst of it all. "Lord, if you had been here," they said to Jesus, "our brother

¹ With gratitude to Barbara Brown Taylor for her beautiful sermon on this text, "Without a Net," *Mixed Blessings*, p118-125.

would not have died.” It’s no wonder that questions of faith were wrapped up in their grief.

Finally and fully is Jesus’s displacement, on full display. Perhaps his concern about how he’d agitate the religious authorities gave him a reason why he didn’t rush to Lazarus’s side. Maybe he didn’t think Lazarus was nearing the end. But when Jesus arrived at their home, Lazarus had been dead for four days. Weeping, wailing, and sorrow were everywhere, and his own overtook him. The gospel tells us Jesus was “greatly disturbed in spirit, and deeply moved.” Moved by his love for his friend, moved by the grief of Mary and Martha, moved by the enormity of loss in all the lives of the world, moved by what he knew stood just ahead for him, Jesus wept.

Jesus wept, right there on the road to the tomb. Jesus wept, and in so doing, dignified the human experience of grief, all the multitudes contained in our losses. Jesus wept, knowing that no life avoids the pain of death, not even his own. Jesus wept, and in his tears, we find a home for our own. Jesus wept, and in the displacement and disorientation of grief, he created a place for our grief. For is there any greater displacer than loss?

Irish poet Padraig O’Tuama tells us that the Irish word for *loneliness*, (“uaigneach”) shares a root with the word for *grave* (“uaigh”).² When we stand at those graves in our life, facing the finality of loss, those are the places we often feel the most alone. Yet no longer, though, do we grieve as those without hope. “I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus says, “those who believe in me, even though they die will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” For the tears that took Jesus to the grave are the ones that take him through the grave. In our tears, where is our salve?

² Padraig O’Tuama, *In the Shelter*, p13

III.

One of the great gifts of my pastor peer learning group, the group you've heard me talk about many times, is the gift of sharing great stories with each other for sermons. Alan told us this one several years ago, of his friend, Dr. John Roberts, a retired minister who served with Alan on the board of visitors of Wake Forest School of Divinity, where he shared this wise and witty story with him.

"Years ago," Alan says, "Dr. Roberts wanted the children of the church to know of the God who helps. So during the Children's Sermon, he gathered them around and told them the story of Lazarus, and he imagined with them what it must have been like for Lazarus waking up in that tomb, still tied up in his grave clothes. He couldn't see. He couldn't move. To illustrate, Dr. Roberts had one willing child stand up and wrapped him in paper towels head to toe. "How's he going to move?" He asked. "He can't walk. Can't run." And the kids shouted out, "He has to hop!"

"That's right!" he said. And then he began to teach the kids something he called the "Lazarus Hop." It went like this. Everyone stood up. Then the organist played the theme of the Adams Family. *Dananana* (snap, snap). Only instead of the snap they would hop. *Dananana* (hop, hop)... *Dananana* (hop, hop)... *Dananana* (hop)... *Dananana* (hop)... *Dananana* (hop, hop). On and on it went, the whole sanctuary filled with the laughter of these hopping kids and plenty of adults too, until the music stopped abruptly. And Dr. Roberts crouched down, "Come here, children." In a soft voice he said, "There will be times in your life when you feel bound up. You can't see where you're going. Maybe you can't even move. And I want you to remember to listen to the

voices you trust. And whatever it takes, I want you to move towards those voices, even if all you can do is hop.”

Dr. Roberts said not a person moved. Silence. Because they knew it was true. There will be times for every one of us where we need to move toward the voices we trust.”³

That’s just it, isn’t it? The movement is ours to do, but we don’t do it alone. The grieving happened in community. The call for action happened in community. The raising happened in community. The unbinding happened in community. The enlivening happened in community! All of it, a witness to the power of ordinary people extending care and grace to one another. Not just for Lazarus and his community, but for each of us and our community! All of it, returning us from the wilds of our desert seasons and wilderness spaces, and re-placing us with each other and with God. All of it, moving toward the voices we trust even if it feels like we can’t move it all.

But the community can’t share in that work unless, at the beckoning of Jesus, Lazarus comes out and takes the first step on his own.

IV.

Friends, these Lenten weeks have created a spare landscape to consider the home we have with God in new ways for such a time as this, ways we’ve been displaced from our homes. I hope for you that you have felt the movement of God and the breath of the Spirit in your life this Lent in ways surprising and new. I know I have, and I hope you have too. But we’re nearing the end of the road. Next week, we’ll walk with Jesus into Jerusalem, we’ll wave our palms and welcome him with hosannas. We’ll stay by his side in that upper room, and receive his gifts of servanthood at the table and basin. We’ll

³ Story as shared with me by dear friend, Rev. Alan Sherouse.

wait with him to the garden, accompany him in his arrest and trial, and walk every one of those fateful steps on the road to the cross, to the tomb, to the garden. This is as displacing a road as it gets. We remain together with Jesus along the way.

But you and I have to take the first step.

It is a step away from the uncompromising cold of the tomb, away from the place of death we can't see beyond. It is a step toward the light of Christ, toward the invitation to new life, toward the love that is stronger than grief or loss or death can be.

I ask you today: what would that step be for you? What is currently locking you in disintegration and decay? What is yoking you to stagnation and indifference? What is keeping you from living life to the full?

To all of these places and hesitations and tightly-held habits and shallow loves, let me echo Jesus when I say “come out.” Come out from the addictions and achievements that hold you captive. Come out from the resentment and rage that bind you. Come out from fear, from anger, from hate, from jealousy. Come out from worry, from anxiety, from languishing, from self-absorption. Come out from the you you despise. Come out from the story in your past that holds you hostage. Come out of these tombs, for life awaits on the other side. “Because God simply keeps reaching down into the dirt of humanity,” Nadia Bolz Weber says, “and pulling us out of the graves we dig for ourselves through our violence, our lies, our selfishness, our arrogance, and our addictions. And God keeps loving us back to life over and over.”⁴

⁴ Nadia Bolz Weber, “Resurrection and the Dirt Under Jesus’s Fingernails,” <https://pray4justice.wordpress.com/2020/04/13/resurrection-and-the-dirt-under-jesus-fingernails-by-nadia-bolz-weber/>

So that when stones are rolled away and you and I stumble out from our tombs – maybe hopping – it is to one another that we must turn for liberation. It’s no accident that in the face of a resuscitated Lazarus, lurching awkwardly towards Jesus and constrained still by the reality and finality of death, that Jesus looks around him to the people and says, “unbind him, and let him go.” When resurrection descends, we must help each other cut the cloths, tear away the tourniquets, break away the bindings.

My preaching professor, Dr. Veronice Miles, once said this: “Resurrected women, men, and children today also require caring communities that are willing to nurture and strengthen them until they are able to walk alone; to remove the graveclothes of self-doubt, social isolation, marginalization, and oppression; to tear away the wrappings of fear, anxiety, loss, and grief, so that unbound women and men, and children might walk in dignity and become creative agents in the world.”⁵

Friends, the good news for today, is that no matter the tomb behind you, may you have the courage to take the first step toward new life. For together with Jesus, together in community, we are unbound and find our place once again. Amen!

⁵ Dr. Veronice Miles, “John 11:1-45,” *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2*, p144