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Freedom From Death's Thrall¹

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Text: John 11: 32-44 (All Saints Day)

Jesus is making his way to Lazarus' graveside. Jesus is going to Bethany of Judea, where his friend Lazarus has died and lies in a tomb. He has many reasons not to go. Prior to our lection, his own disciples asked him not to return. The disciples worried – quite rightly – that a return to Judea might mean Jesus' death. Jesus himself seemed reluctant, too. When he first heard that Lazarus was sick, he waited. Jesus *waited*. He left only after Lazarus had died. But then he decided to make his way to Bethany. Despite his disciples' fears, despite the death of his friend, Jesus had resolved to make the trip, to go to Lazarus' grave.

So how does Mary respond when Jesus arrives? Mary meets our Lord with a reproach and with tears. "Lord," Mary says to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Yet Mary's reproach is more than struggling faith, for it is bathed in her tears. Her words are interspersed with sobs.

Who among us on this All Saints Day cannot sympathize with Mary's grief – a grief drowned in tears? Here we are at St. Mark's surrounded as it were by a memorial plaque of names in the narthex and flowers representing departed loved ones on the altar. Why, Mary's is the most human reaction to death in the world! We experience loss, and tears begin to flow.

Now comes the big question. How does *Jesus* respond to Mary and the scene at Bethany? Well, for one thing, he cries. Our Lord weeps. Jesus shares their grief. Stop for a moment with me on the way to Lazarus' grave and consider this mystery: Christ himself, though the Son of God, takes time to weep. Some claim John's Gospel portrays Jesus as a divine figure just seeming to be human, as if Christ walked on earth, but never really touched the dust with his feet. To all whose Jesus seems strangely removed from the blood, sweat, and tears of everyday human life, Jesus' weeping speaks volumes. Christ is not

just like us; he is *with* us. In our moment of grief, we must never forget that Christ grieves with us. Christ weeps with us.

But Jesus also responds to the scene of loss in Bethany in an unexpected way. His tears give way to anger! Jesus gets mad. How does our text put it? “Jesus was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” Yet the English translation covers up the word in Greek. The Greek text says that he “was enraged in his spirit and was troubled.” Jesus, though in tears, is also angry.

“Angry?” we ask, “Jesus?” Why would Jesus be angry? We might suppose Jesus angry at God for letting this awful scene at Bethany happen. But that’s hard to square with the story. Jesus in John’s Gospel lives in constant communion with God from beginning to end. Surely, Jesus is not angry at God. Perhaps then Jesus’ anger is directed at his disciples, at Mary and Martha, or even Lazarus for having so little faith. Yet that doesn’t fit the text, either. That kind of anger is inconsistent with the Jesus who shares their tears and now turns to Lazarus’ tomb.

Perhaps, then, Jesus’ anger is actually with death itself. Maybe Jesus is mad at the power of death and the hold it has on his friends. We recall their earlier reactions. His disciples were afraid to move ahead out of a fear of death. Mary’s faith is drowned in tears because of the despair of death. Now Jesus himself grieves, is moved to anger at death – moved enough to act. Death had laid its cold, bony hand on his disciples, on his friends, on Lazarus himself and would not let go. Jesus was enraged that death held all those whom he loved in its icy thrall.

How do we know? Because of what Jesus *does* about it. He doesn’t just raise dead Lazarus; he unbinds him. Jesus frees him, and ultimately the world God loves so much, from death’s cold grip.

Truth be told, we usually “freeze frame” on Jesus’ raising of the dead man Lazarus. Even in our age of medical miracles we focus on Lazarus’ rising from the deathly stench of four days in the grave. Yet we should note that the end of the miracle is not a resuscitated corpse. After all, when Lazarus emerges out of the tomb Jesus’ work is just beginning. Within earshot of his disciples, in the presence of Mary and Martha, Jesus must utter one more word ... a word of release: “Unbind him!” Jesus says with the full sovereignty of God. “Unbind him and let him go!” Apparently Jesus is not satisfied with temporarily giving Lazarus a second lesson on life. Jesus raises him *to free him and thus his friends from death*. Jesus’ reaction leads him to break the chains of death’s hold on them all.

To us so long bound by fear, by rage, by tears, Jesus speaks the same word in resurrection power, "Unbind him! Unbind her! And let them go!" Jesus is not satisfied with calling us from death just so we can have a pulse. Jesus is also not content with the mere moral improvement of the dead. Jesus unbinds us from the grave cloths of death, the fear of death, and the tears of death so that we may be free to live now even in death's shadow.

Lutheran theologian William Lazareth tells of a conversation he had with a colleague who worked as a Lutheran pastor during the Nazi occupation of Norway in World War II.² In 1942 the Quisling occupation government had forbidden people to worship on Easter Sunday over a disagreement with the bishop. All the churches had been locked. In one village, however, a group of people gathered and began marching toward the church and singing,

A Mighty Fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing;
Our helper he amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing ...

By the time they reached the church the S.S. commander and his troops were awaiting them with guns pointed. The commander indicated that if any one sang, a young woman holding a baby in the group would be shot. There was quiet for a while, then a tiny voice began singing:

Did we in our own strength confide
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right man ...

Then the rest of the crowd joined in:

... on our side,
The man of God's own choosing ...

Lazareth, hearing this story from the Norwegian pastor, is shocked. He asks his friend the question, "Weren't they scared? Weren't they scared she'd get shot?" The Norwegian pastor replied, "Bill, who do you think started the singing?"

Chances are, our freedom from death's thrall may not be quite so compelling, let alone heroic. Yet we do know we at St. Mark's are a church living in the shadow of the cross. We exist cheek-by-jowl with an inner-city school that presents us with both challenges and opportunities. We stand across the street from a hospital that struggles to staff its own emergency room. And to top it off, there's often not even room to park!

Yet on this All Saints Day we, whom Christ has raised from death, can emerge from the fearful isolation of our tomb, rub our eyes, and squint to see the dawning freedom Christ intends. We tend to see it in little signs, *glimpses*. Like most people, we are too often divided and isolated in our hectic daily lives. Yet here at St. Mark's in the fellowship hall we sip coffee and nibble on cookies, we have time for one another – and amidst giggles and apple juice somebody's kids become everybody's kids. For that matter, like most middle-class Canadians, many of us are shielded by our homes and cars from contact with the poor. Yet here in this place on Wednesday nights we at St. Mark's scoop scalloped potatoes and ham and break bread with the homeless and the working poor. Finally, though we as cantankerous human beings are sometimes divided from each other, Christ calls us out of deathly ways and around a table where there's bread and wine enough for all. It's as if in all these things we are, as Timothy Wengert has said, “caught in the act of confessing our faith”³; we are those who by Christ's call have been raised from death to resurrection life and gospel freedom in death's very shadow.

At one point in the 1990s, when occupation forces left the city of Hebron in the middle of the night, one Palestinian leader put it beautifully: “We woke up this morning to freedom.” On this All Saints Day we are raised from deathly isolation and freed for resurrection life. Reminded of all the faithful who have gone before us at St. Mark's – all the saints whose names are lovingly tucked into hymnals and Bibles – we rejoice in the one thing that binds all of us saints here together. Christ has raised us from the grave. So we can *live* in the shadow of the cross, right here and right now.

Notes

- 1 This sermon was preached in St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Kitchener, Ontario, on the Festival of All Saints, 5 November 2006.
- 2 William Lazareth shared this story as part of his Commencement Address at Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota, U.S.A., 5 May 1980. A summary of the address and the story can be found in *Concordialumni News* 18:4 (Summer, 1980): 14-18.
- 3 This phrase comes from an address by theologian Timothy Wengert at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary's “Luther Hostel” in June 2006. The phrase was a theme of a sermon series at St. Mark's during the fall of 2006, for which this sermon was developed.