

Death Is Red Tape

John 11:1-44

Note: The Gospel reading is woven into the sermon as a way of connecting us with hearing the word of the Lord.

The Gospel according to St. John, interpreted by Rod.

There is an ad for Southwest Airlines that shows a family being wrapped in an unending pile of red tape. They want to use their free miles to take a vacation trip and the other airline's red tape with blackout dates and senseless rules makes it impossible. Red tape is not just a malady of the airlines. Red tape is the piling up of obstructive, overcomplicated procedures. Death is just so much red tape from the powers and the principalities. As Jesus says of Lazarus, bound head and foot, "Loose him and let him go."

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' Begin with the pervasiveness of illness. An illness in the family. Out of town, on vacation, on a business trip, and the word comes: "The one you love is sick." There are times when we spend more time in hospital rooms than our own homes. ICU. Nursing home. Surgical ward. Dr's office. "Is it terminal?" "Will he live?" "What if it is Alzheimer's?" Illness comes to all of us.

Lazarus is ill and his sisters send for Jesus. Lazarus may have been the best friend of Jesus. Maybe Lazarus listened when Jesus needed to complain about the twelve – slow, lacking in vision, not responsive, or "they just don't understand me." You know – the usual stuff that pastors say about their congregations on Monday morning.

¹⁴**Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. But let us go to him."** Not he passed. Not he went to a better place. Lazarus is dead. In the face of death, sometimes we mumble bad religious sayings: "It was his time." "It was God's will." "He's in a better place." A wife lost her husband and when people said, "He's in a better place," she cried inside and said, "I don't want him to be in a better place, I want him to be with me." A character in a short story says, [The folks at church] "made me see it was God's will for Billy to die and me to live and serve the Lord. Now, I know he's waiting for me, and it's not as bad as it was." People who are ready with quick answers are "like children in a fairy tale, singing songs, holding hands. Never mind the dark wood, the wolves and witches. Or birds that eat up the bread crumbs."

Death dominates our world. The obituary pages of the Dayton Daily News last Thursday contained the news of 51 deaths. Death around us, yes, and death in us all.

²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.²¹ Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.’²³ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’²⁴ Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’²⁵ Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’²⁷ She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.’

Martha loves Jesus so much but in the pain of her grief, she cries: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” “Why didn’t you come sooner?” How many of us still feel guilty because we weren’t there when a loved one died or we didn’t say or do enough before she died? Some would say, “It was his time,” but I don’t believe there is a pre-destined time for us to die. We must learn to have radical patience with the undetermined contingencies of our lives. If you say, “It was just his time,” you are repeating a platitude picked up from some hyper-Calvinism.

Sometimes death follows illness so fast we can’t believe it. Shock and denial hit us right between the eyes, deep in our hearts. Someone says that Charles died and we say, “No. That’s not possible; I just saw him last week at Dorothy Lane.” Martha is not so much doubting as dumbstruck by the lightning quick attack of death and the awfulness of her grief.

Death scares us, but we don’t get that from the New Testament. We do everything possible to avoid even thinking about death. Our funerals are exercises in deception. “Don’t she look natural.” In the NT, death is like taking a journey. In the moment of dying we are transported to new reality. Resurrection unravels the red tape and we arrive at our new destination. Death is just red tape; Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

Believing in resurrection is not easy, but Jesus pushes Martha: “I mean here and now Lazarus will live again.” The correction offered by Jesus is the most powerful statement in Scripture: “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.” But his words are rendered unreal by the pain of Martha’s loss. Too early to talk resurrection.

³³When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.³⁴ He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’³⁵ Jesus began to weep.³⁶ So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’ Everyone crying. No pious words. No guilt trips. Presence and shared grief. Great love produces great grief. Remember the friends of Job? “They went to comfort him. When they saw him they raised their voices and wept aloud. They sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.” Presence, food, shared tears – these we offer.

“Jesus wept” makes us love him more. He weeps because he loved Lazarus so much. He weeps at the debilitating necessity of death that is so antithetical to his life-giving. Or perhaps he weeps that he is bringing Lazarus back to this world which can’t compare to the world Lazarus had joined only four days earlier. Here is harder than there. Here is darkness there is light. Here there is sickness and pain, there is health and wholeness. Here there are burdens; there we lay our burdens down. Here there is crying and pain; there God will wipe the tears from our eyes. Here there is death; there death is no more.

So what happened? Jesus looked upwards and said, ‘Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I 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.’ ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ ⁴⁴The 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.’”

When Jesus prays, “Father,” he is getting us ready for when he will not physically be there. He’s saying, the next time death comes, lift your eyes and pray, “Our Father who art in heaven.” We are not left without resources. Jesus tells his disciples later in John, “I’m leaving, but you trust in God, trust in me. I will send another counselor while I am gone, and he will guide you into truth and never leave you. Because I live, you also will live. My peace I give you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. We are not without significant resources.

Was Lazarus literally raised from the dead? I don’t know but any resurrection is superior to death. Jesus is the resurrection because he is one with the Father, the Great I AM, whose life is eternal. Where Jesus comes, resurrection happens. If Jesus walked through Woodland Cemetery, the dead would rise to greet the Great I AM. Jesus is one with the source, sustainer, and provider of life. Resurrection is not just the raising of a dead body. It is life, all the pulsing, throbbing life in the world. Resurrection is eternal life and it begins now. Our baptism was our resurrection: buried with Christ and raised with Christ. Believing or not believing in the physical resurrection of Lazarus is not really the point. There’s no reason to reject Christianity if the resurrection of Lazarus is not physical, and there’s no real increase in faith if you do believe it. What matters is that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

We have been knocking on heaven’s doors for centuries with our questions: Did Jesus really raise a dead man? Did he really walk on water? Did he really turn water into wine? Someone once said, “I don’t know about changing water to wine. All I know is that in my house Jesus changed whiskey into furniture and food, and that’s miracle enough for me.” The raising of Lazarus is a symbol of a people wrapped in the red tape of death-dealing systems, coming forth from the graves of this world – and that’s resurrection enough for me.

Then, of all things, Jesus shouts, “Lazarus come forth.” I imagine a dramatic pause. Death is not in the habit of releasing its victims. Here comes Lazarus shuffling

back to life at the command of Jesus. Lazarus, still bound in death's red tape, has trouble walking out of the darkness into the light of day, shading his incredulous eyes from the sun. So Jesus gives a second command: "Loose him and let him go." So here comes Lazarus leading what will become an endless parade of folks set free from the dead. Lazarus being loosed, unbound, set free, liberated takes my breath away.

But be careful. Being a person of the resurrection is dangerous work. Lazarus was barely one day into his resurrected life when the authorities hatched a plot to assassinate him. Is John helping his congregation grasp the danger of confessing faith and following Jesus? This is why we get a resurrection story in Lent. For John it is the raising of Lazarus that causes the crucifixion of Jesus. The death and resurrection of Lazarus is prequel to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus gave Lazarus back to Mary and Martha, but in his own death and resurrection Jesus offers life to an entire dead world.

The great I AM says that we don't have to be afraid. Washington Gladden, pastor of First Congregational Church in Columbus for thirty years said,

"Unquestionably there is cowardice and subserviency in the pulpit, as everywhere else. But there need not be . . . I have not always commanded the assent of my auditors, but they have recognized my right to speak, and never sought to muzzle me." Not being afraid is crucial for preachers.

Now, do we get it? God wants to release us from all the red tape that keeps us wrapped in death with the doubt, fear, anger, and confusion that death brings. We have been raised from the dead. We have been turned loose to bring life to every dead place in this world. Where Christ is there is light and life. We have significant resources at our disposal. And we can trust the reality of the one who says, "I am the resurrection and the life."

Here ends the reading of the Gospel.

Praise to you, Lord Christ.