***7 Stops on the Road to Resurrection: Week Five: Revolution***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on March 17, 2024*

*based on John 11:1-6, 17-22, 32-44*

“Jesus wept.” The shortest verse in the Bible

It is a verse that brings a few people up short. I’m talking about those whose idea of Jesus is all about him walking on water, or pronouncing, “I am the way the truth and the life; no one comes to God but by me.” They might question Jesus being truly bent over in deep wet grief.

But there it is. Jesus experienced that most common, most painful of all human experiences, the death of a loved one followed by the natural release; a cascade of human emotion. Jesus …. wept.

Lazarus’s death, and all that entailed, the loss of a treasured friend, a reminder of the brevity and fragility of all human life, was a reminder of the inevitability of his own death which, at that very moment, was looming on the horizon.

Jesus wept, and thinking of Gaza, he may still be weeping.

In his wonderful memoir, Credo, the late Rev. William Sloane Coffin (considered the best preacher alive in his day) thought out-loud about all of this in the book’s last chapter titled, “The End of Life.”

Coffin (aptly named) was in his late 70s and had suffered a major stroke. His words have an immediacy about them, and, as always, they are wise and human; wry and playful. I’ve quoted them before but not to this extent.

“Without death, we’d never live,” Coffin says. “Consider only the alternative—life without death. Life without death would be interminable—literally and figuratively. We’d take days just to get out of bed, weeks to decide ‘what’s next?’ Students would never graduate, faculty meetings and all kinds of other gathering would go on for months.”

Without death, Coffin suggests, “chances are we’d be bored.” So “death cannot be the enemy if it’s death that brings us to life.”

Then, with a twinkle in his eye he says: “With no deaths there would long since have been no births, the world being overpopulated with immortal beings.

Just think: Giotto maybe, but no Cézanne … Purcell maybe, but no Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, let alone Aaron Copland; Roman gladiators yes, but no … Muhammad Ali. And, of course, no you and me, no grandchildren!” (pp. 167–168).

“Jesus wept” is a small detail in a much larger story: the death and raising of Lazarus. In John’s Gospel, the trajectory of that larger story turns toward Jerusalem and Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion.

Word comes to Jesus that his friend Lazarus is ill. Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, live in Bethany, a small town near Jerusalem. They are apparently very good friends, the four of them. An easy familiarity between Jesus and the two women comes through in the text.

Against the advice of his disciples, Jesus decides to go to Lazarus’s side. But he waits several days. When he arrives, Lazarus is already dead. Both Mary and Martha express exasperation that he didn’t arrive sooner.

Mourners who are friends of the family also wonder what was keeping him and if what people were saying about his miraculous power were true, why he didn’t exercise some of it on behalf of his dear friend.

And then Jesus wept. In his grief, his eyes still wet from his tears, “greatly disturbed,” Jesus orders the stone rolled away while Lazarus’s sister Martha is busily objecting to the aesthetics of such a thing.

Jesus shouts into the open grave, “Lazarus, come out of there!”

The dead man comes out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in linen. And Jesus says to them: “Unbind him and let him go.” And that’s it.

There were two immediate results. People were astonished; brought up short, flabbergasted to see this power of life over death standing before them.

And the authorities, worried about what this might mean for their authority, begin to plan in earnest how to get rid of him.

Apparently Jesus’s power over death is a threat to public order. Go figure.

Now at this point, we moderns who read this story objectively, who are critical thinkers – we say, “Wait a minute! Let’s go over that again. Things like that just don’t happen.” And we start going down the road of biological plausibility.

Well, lots of people do have near-death experiences. They claim they have come back from the dead and tell us about it, sometimes on YouTube.

Some, more conservative about their religious faith, go down the road of doctrinal precision: if Jesus is the Son of God, God incarnate, the second person of the Trinity, he can do whatever he wants to do, including breaking every biological, physiological rule in the book raising a dead man. “If Lazarus wasn’t raised,” they will say, “then faith in God is meaningless.”

But those are both dead ends. I’d rather call us back from those avenues and invite us to ponder the real question, the question that emerges from our critical way of reading scripture: namely, what is the word of God for us here? What in us is being addressed—or to put it particularly, what in us is being called out? What in us is God summoning to get up and walk away from death into life?

Jesus wept. Was Lazarus’ death the first experience Jesus had with loss as an adult? Definitely not. Typically, (but not always) we modern folk, because of modern medicine, sail through the first two decades of life; we lose some grandparents and aunts and uncles along the way, and in the third or fourth decade our lives crash into the reality of death when someone our age or just a little older dies who we love. That death may come out of the blue. It stuns us and reverberates in our lives every day thereafter. And life is never the same. Never.

I love something Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his parents on Christmas Eve 1943 from his Nazi prison cell:

*Nothing can make up for the absence of someone we love, and it would be wrong to try to find a kind of substitute; we must simply hold out and see it through. This sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the bonds between us. It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; God doesn’t fill it -- on the contrary, God keeps it empty and so helps us keep alive our communion with each other.*

Death deepens us, makes us more able to understand and stand with one another. We clergy know that you don’t become a pastor, a real one, until you have picked up a few personal wounds; you can’t accompany people through the valley of the shadow of death until you’ve been through it yourself. The death of someone close changes something deep inside.

When his dear friend, Charles Williams died, C. S. Lewis wrote, “No event has so corroborated my faith in the next world as Williams did simply by dying. When the idea of death and the idea of Williams thus met in my mind, it was the idea of death that changed” (Robert McAfee Brown, “Meditation on a Particular Death,” The Pseudonyms of God, p. 159).

“Unbind him and let him go,” Jesus commanded Lazarus’s friends. You know, we hear very little of Lazarus again. “Unbind him and let him go.” Go where? Where did Lazarus go? What did he do? Did he live out the rest of his life differently? He must have. Death teaches us how very precious the gift of life is.

That can change a person. Death does that: teaches us how very good it is to be alive, teaches us the value of every new day, teaches us gratitude every morning, teaches us to ***not*** be wasteful, to make every day count because every day is a gift we did nothing to earn or deserve.

Jane Kenyon was among our most distinguished poets. She was also a Presbyterian. Her most beloved poem is called …

**“Otherwise”**

I got out of bed
on two strong legs
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
. . .
All morning I did
the work I love.
. . .
We ate dinner together at a table with silver candlesticks.
It might have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the wall, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know
it will be otherwise.
(from Otherwise, Graywolf Press, 1996)

Jesus said, “Unbind him and let him go.” You know, death teaches us to identify whatever might keep us from living fully. Death teaches us to never be content to be a victim, to stop whining and blaming other people for our problems, to take responsibility for our lives.

Down through the centuries, the raising of Lazarus has brought courage and hope to people living under political oppression, people who understandably knew themselves to be living in the midst of death and who decided not to allow death to have dominion over them.

It was a favorite story for American slaves literally bound by their chains. And for people who were part of tiny house churches in Central America as death squads threatened and brutalized and killed them. It meant so much to black people living in the nightmare of apartheid in South Africa.

This story can be a promise that Jesus Christ is on the side of life, our lives, too, as we look for the strength and courage to walk away from whatever holds us back, keeps us from living fully the gift of life.

“I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus says to Martha. We have not arrived at Easter yet. As we follow him to Jerusalem in the days ahead, his triumphal entry, his betrayal, arrest, he will come finally to his own encounter with the power of death.

Yes, but look, as he walks bravely toward his cross we can see that he is in a way already a victor. He sounds like Martin Luther King Jr. on the last night of his life. Radiantly triumphant. In him death itself will be defeated. The love of God that lives in him, will rise to life. That is a revolution of sorts.

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord,” the psalmist wrote.

In the 21st chapter of the last book of the Bible we read, *I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among God’s people, and God will dwell with them. They will be God’s people, and God will be with them and be their Lord.**‘God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will have passed away.”*

“Before every birth and after every death there is still God,” Bill Coffin wrote at the end of his memoir. “The abyss of God’s love is deeper than the abyss of death” (pp. 169–172).

In the meantime we are free to live fully and gratefully, every day of the life that is ours, and to know that those who have gone before us are safe in the mercy and love of God forever.

Thanks be to God