

San Lorenzo Community Church

United Church of Christ

Sermon from Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, April 02, 2017

Hear now a reading from the Gospel of John 11:1-45

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

²¹ "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴ Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

³⁵ Jesus wept.

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ "Take away the stone," he said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

This ends the reading from the Gospel of John. Thanks be to God.

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The Call to Worship had just been pronounced starting Easter Sunday Morning service in an East Texas church. The choir started its processional, singing "Up from the Grave He Arose" as they marched in perfect step down the center aisle to the front of the church. The last lady was wearing shoes with very slender heels. Without a thought for her fancy heels, she marched toward the grating that covered that hot air register in the middle of the aisle.

Suddenly the heel of one shoe sank into the hole in the register grate. In a flash she realized her predicament. Not wishing to hold up the whole processional, without missing a step, she slipped her foot out of her shoe and continued marching down the aisle. There wasn't a hitch. The processional moved with clock-like precision.

The first man after her spotted the situation and without losing a step, reached down and pulled up her shoe, but the entire grate came with it! Surprised, but still singing, the man kept on going down the aisle, holding in his hand the grate with the shoe attached. Everything still moved like clockwork.

Still in tune and still in step, the next man in line stepped into the open register and disappeared from sight. The service took on a special meaning that Sunday, for just as the choir ended with "Alleluia! Christ arose!" a voice was heard under the church shouting..."I hope all of you are out of the way 'cause I'm coming out now!" The little girl closest to the aisle shouted down the register, "Come on, Jesus! We'll help you out of there!"

This is a story in two parts – one part is the focus of Jesus talking to and raising Lazarus from the dead. It's one of the miracles Jesus performed.

Now remember, Jesus is the guy who was standing in front of the temple of Jerusalem. The massive gleaming brick and stone and gold House of God. He is the one who said, destroy this temple and I'll rebuild it in three days. The people listening to him say, "How are you ever going to do that? It took 46 years to build this temple." But he wasn't talking about that temple. He was talking about himself.

He was saying, "I'm going to be killed, because that's where this is headed." Because you don't confront corrupt systems of power without paying for it, sometimes with your own blood. And so he headed to his execution. This is the path he is on when he stops in Judea because of the plea from Martha and Mary for their brother Lazarus.

So we have to ask ourselves, is the world ultimately a cold, hard, dead place? Does death have the last word? Is it truly, honestly, actually dark? And so whatever light we do see, whatever good we do stumble upon, are those just blips on the radar? Momentary interruptions in an otherwise meaningless existence, because if that's the case, then despair is the only reasonable response. It's easy and even tempting to be cynical.

But Jesus says destroy this temple and I'll rebuild it. He says his execution would not be the end. He's talking about something new and unexpected happening after his death. He's talking about resurrection. Martha believes. She has the faith of an activist – Martha had already told Jesus, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." She believes. Still, she warns Jesus, cover your

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nose, this is going to stink. Whatever is left inside that tomb – well, rotting and dry bones never smell good.

Truth is - we all stink just like Lazarus. We all stink. We smell to high heaven. We have an odor about us. We have a certain stinky smell. We know things about ourselves that others do not know and we fear, if they knew them, they wouldn't like us anymore. We have things in our history, things we have done, things that were done to us, things that happened around us, that, well, we just don't go around announcing to the world because we worry we would lose respect, or change the equilibrium of the relationship.

Yet we know, within ourselves, is something rotten, stinky, dry and crusty. Something that hasn't seen the light of day for a very long time. Still, we read that Jesus is standing outside the tomb for Lazarus and I can't help but think to myself – "Don't do it, Jesus. Don't do it. That smell is just going to go everywhere."

Yet, when you think about it, you realize that resurrections do not happen when everything is sterile and clean and smelling like our favorite room deodorizer. Where things stink, when things are messy, that's exactly where resurrections can occur!

Resurrection announces that God has not given up on this world because this world matters, this world that we call home – dirt, blood, sweat, skin, light and water. This world that God is redeeming and restoring and renewing. Greed, violence and abuse, they are not right; and they cannot last because they belong to death and death does not belong.

Jesus rolls away the stone and says, almost shouts, "Hey, you in there, come out!" Lazarus lives.

But that is only half of this miracle story. Jesus then looks at the crowd gathered, Jesus sees the community of people, he sees Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters, he sees his disciples who have been with him for this whole journey, he sees believers and unbelievers amazed at this act of resurrection. And Jesus sees that Lazarus is still wound up in the burial clothes, he is still caught in the stinky mess and he says to all the people: "Unbind him and let him go."

You see, now the community needs to assist. Now we have something to do to fulfill this miracle. Now you are given a responsibility to Lazarus and every other person in your life who needs to be unbound.

We need one another. This is the work of the church. We work for justice and mercy; we work for freedom and we work for love. We look to one another to complete the action of Resurrection.

On a hot summer afternoon in August 1998, 37-year-old U.S. Army Sergeant First Class Rossano V. Gerald and his young son Gregory drove across the Oklahoma border into a nightmare. A career soldier and a highly decorated veteran of Desert Storm and Operation United Shield in Somalia, SFC Gerald, a black man of Panamanian descent, found that he could not travel more than 30 minutes through the state without being stopped twice: first by the Roland City Police Department, and then by the Oklahoma Highway Patrol.

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During the second stop, which lasted two-and-half hours, the troopers terrorized SFC Gerald's 12-year-old son with a police dog, placed both father and son in a closed car with the air conditioning off and fans blowing hot air, and warned that the dog would attack if they attempted to escape. Halfway through the episode – perhaps realizing the extent of their lawlessness – the troopers shut off the patrol car's video evidence camera.

As Ross described later: I feel like I'm a guy who's walked the straight line -- respecting people, going to church, serving my country and everything. Yet two cops pull me over in a period of thirty minutes and my only crime is driving while black?"

There is no more powerful place for the church to be than to do the work of unbinding others and setting them free.

Marisela lives in New York City now. But she and her family were born and raised in a poor part of Guadalajara, Mexico. She writes: "My father worked as a ranchero and my mother was a waitress at a local restaurant. I was the oldest of all my siblings and I had to set an example for the younger ones. One day, I was at home when I found out my father had been killed. It was a tragic day and my mother, devastated from the loss, wanted to move to America, speaking of being safer there and how America could help us all.

We moved the following week, wanting to leave Guadalajara and the crime of the small town. We were missed and there was no one else to care after the ranch since my father died, so they closed it down, but it was necessary. We no longer wanted to live in such a dangerous place, so when we moved to America, we found out we had taken up all of the small apartment complex. After we moved in, there was no more room, so I guess we were lucky. My siblings and I went to school and had good grades, my mother working as a waitress, yet again. I grew up to be a police officer, wanting to be able to prevent crimes in my city, New York, like to what happened to my father.

Resurrection is not complete until all people are free.

Unbind somebody. Where you find someone in a stinky, no good, unhealthy mess: your friend, your wife, your husband, even the stranger. Where you find someone struggling to be free, unbind them and let them go. Do not keep them tangled up in . Those clothes constrict and make us ill.

Resurrection says what we do with our lives matters. Every act of compassion matters, every work of art that celebrates the good and the truth matters, every fair and honest act of business and trade, every kind word matters. Every time you help one another, you reach out to a stranger, you offer directions and hope – it all matters.

We are living in a world in the midst of rescue, with endless, unexpected possibilities. And when you find yourself assuming that it's over. That it's lost, gone, broken and that it can never be put back together again.

When things stink to high heaven and you swear you can never get the stench out. Hold on a minute and listen for that voice telling you that this is the place where resurrection happens. That is the moment when life has just begun. Amen.