

Psalm 30; John 11:1-45

**Love Wins©
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This surely is a timely story for us this day isn't it? We tearfully said good-bye to the patriarch of this church and of his family – Bruce Dryer – just yesterday. Our minds are still trying to grasp the fact that he was here last Sunday and won't be here again. And it is with heavy hearts that we can certainly relate to the grieving and mourning that Jesus found with Mary and Martha for their brother, Lazarus.

Mary and Martha clearly thought that Jesus had waited too long to help their brother. They had sent word for Jesus to come right away when Lazarus became ill. But he did not go immediately. That must have seemed quite strange since Jesus was a friend to this family.

He wasn't that far away from Bethany. It was just a short walk from the village on the other side of the Jordan but he waited. He waited for what seemed to long. Lazarus was dead by the time he left for Bethany.

His disciples would have had him stay where he was. He had had a run in with the Pharisees who had tried to have him stoned. They were happy to stay put. But now, after four days, Jesus announces that he is ready to go.

The disciples are as confused as Martha will be when they arrive. Jesus has to explain that Lazarus is dead – not merely sleeping. The disciples think there isn't any good reason in light of that news, for them to walk into trouble. But Jesus insists, and they decide they will go. They will die, if need be, to go with him.

That's how much they loved Jesus. That's how much Jesus loved Lazarus and Martha and Mary. Love wins out even in the face of death. Well, especially in the face of death when Jesus is present.

And Jesus wept with compassion as he saw his friends grieve. Even knowing the power of resurrection, even knowing that this death of Lazarus would soon be reversed – still Jesus was overcome with compassion for these women who were so distraught. It was a deep love he had for them that stirred his own emotions and caused Jesus to weep. In fact, many of the Jews said to one another "See how he loved him!"

Of course, the rest of the story is so beyond our comprehension that it is difficult to wrap our minds around it. Jesus told them to take away the stone that was at the opening, sealing the tomb.

Martha, fearful and amazed argued "But Lord. It's been four days. There will be a terrible smell by now." I can't help but prefer, with some amusement, the King James version of this. It translates as "Lord, by this time he stinketh."

They took away the stone. Jesus prayed. Can you just see the people standing there, mouths dropped open, eyes staring to see what this Jesus was up to?

Surely they felt fear and dread and apprehension. Surely they wanted to run. They had just tucked death away. Let's get on with the business of mourning and be done with it so we can forget, or at least shove it aside so we don't have to think anymore – at least for a while - about our own mortality.

The silence must have been deafening and frightful as they waited while Jesus prayed. And then, with a loud command, the voice of the Son of God called out to the dead man inside the tomb, the man who had quit breathing four days earlier, the one who was wrapped up in burial cloths.

LAZARUS! COME OUT!!!!

And if you think the waiting was scary, what feelings do you think the results of that command brought? Amazement. Joy. Fear. Praise. Belief! Happiness. Love.

Oh yes. And anger. There were some there who did not like this miracle one little bit. It was the clincher that made the final decision to have Jesus killed.

Jesus waited until Lazarus was dead so that the glory of God would be seen. And it certainly was! And many believed that day and many of those people were compelled to rejoice and give praises when Jesus went on to Jerusalem, riding a donkey – riding to his death.

But some were angry. Some just thought he was a blasphemer – someone trying to claim to be God when he wasn't. I tell you, its right in front of their eyes and they could not see. They were in the dark. They were blind to God's glory.

But even as Jesus knew what the coming days would bring, especially after this amazing act of showing God's glory and power, still he did it ... because of love.

But what does it mean for us? On this 6th day after our beloved friend has died what can it possibly mean? How does it speak to us?

How often have we gone to stand at the grave of a loved one who has died, silently whispering their name, wishing they could hear us, wishing we could hear them, wishing we could see their face.

Never in all those times have I seen a dead body come back to life. Never have I heard the massive headstone creak as it moves or seen a dead person rise up.

Yet, I will say with everything within me, I believe that is happening. I believe that what I said yesterday is true – that death is not the end of our story. I believe that we do rise and live – even if I can't see it happening right now. I believe I will see it someday.

Death is something we absolutely have no control over. Sure, we can do all we can to be healthy and to stay safe, but deep inside we all know that we are dying. It is a part of life. From the day we are born we are dying. We are frail and mortal. We started this Lenten journey with ashes and the words, "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

But this story of Lazarus is ours too! Love wins. With Jesus, every single time there is death, love wins. Because Jesus loves us, gave his life for us on a cruel cross, death does not mean the end. Love always wins.

Because the power of God is more powerful than any thing death can do, Jesus was raised from the dead. Lazarus' rising from the dead was to show the glory and power of God so that those who were witnesses would believe. Yet Lazarus – poor Lazarus – had to face the sting of death again.

But God spoke in the tomb of Jesus, commanding him to rise and come out and he never died again and because he lives, we too shall live. Love wins again and again and again!

But there is one more thing that we need to look at because it is so significant in this story and yet, quite possibly, it is easy to overlook.

Remember how Jesus, after Lazarus came struggling out of the tomb – Lazarus who was still wrapped up in all those stinky burial cloths – remember how Jesus said to those witnesses around Lazarus – "Unbind him and let him go!"

That is our command as witnesses to the resurrection; as people who have seen and known the glory and power of God's love - our command is to pay it forward, to unbind those around us who are wrapped up in their stinking death clothes – clothes that keep them feeling oppressed, that keep them down in the bottomless pit that they just can't climb out of without help, without love.

This is our command – that we love one another. That we not hold anyone captive with our own needs and demands or with greed or with judgment.

Perhaps it is an unbinding by forgiving, by letting go of resentment, by showing compassion and empathy and understanding. We are commanded to unbind so that love wins over and over and over again.

As we near the end of our Lenten wilderness journey, we know that we are approaching Palm Sunday – a joyous Sunday with a parade of palms – yet a day that ends so somber as we follow Jesus into the gloom of Holy Week and Good Friday.

But even as we walk in that darkness – we do it together – intentional about unbinding one another in this powerful season. We walk in darkness, but we know Easter is coming.

Just as the funeral liturgy says in the commendation about death – “all of us go down to the dust, yet even at the grave we make our song – Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!”

Love wins. God’s love gave us a Savior. Jesus’ love went to the cross. God’s love raised the dead and gave us hope in the face of death that it is not the end. That we too shall live!

We, who know this amazing love of God, are called to pay that love forward as we unbind the broken hearted, the grieving, the poor, the oppressed and yes, all those in our relationships who are carrying guilt and longing for forgiveness.

You have in your bulletin two cards that say “Love Wins. Pay it forward. Jesus did.” These cards are designed by the pastors in Holly and we are giving these to the community to see how we can pay God’s love forward, person to person, neighbor to neighbor.

Maybe it is paying for someone’s lunch unexpectedly, or doing an act of kindness, cleaning a yard, delivering some groceries, helping someone across a street – whatever it is (and the possibilities are endless) – give a card to one whom you do something for.

We have lots of cards, so ask for more if you wish. We hope to see this community passing on the powerful love of God with great joy, and having some fun while doing it!

Friends, in Jesus Christ our Lord, we are called out of the dark tombs we get bound up in, even now in our earthly lives. Jesus commands us to come out, to cast off our death clothes that stinketh, and to live. And then, to unbind others once we are set free.

‘I am the resurrection and the life,’ says the Lord. “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

Love wins. Every time. Thanks be to God.
Amen