

"Had You Been Here"
A meditation on John 11:1-45

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If you've ever been here for the Advent Workshop, you know it's a loud, busy evening. In the activity center people are making crafts and Advent wreaths while others are decorating the sanctuary. Around a table in the Fellowship Hall, people are filling socks with gifts for our Room in the Inn Guests, while over in the corner, a group is gathered to refill the candle holders for Christmas Eve. There's music and food, and costumes and silliness. All appropriate to the season in which we gather to welcome a new baby.

And then there was three year old Charles. The image of solemnity. Charles, with eyes the size of dinner plates. In the middle of the noise and confusion, Charles, standing with his father, looks up at me with the saddest eyes I have ever seen and saying,

"Ms. Cathy, my imaginary friend Logan **died**."

This was heavy news. I had **no** idea that imaginary friends could die! I knew they sometimes moved away, but death? Even imaginary friends have to face this difficult journey? I was at a loss for words.

"Well, um...uh...(think, think, what should I say?) He *died*?" (stalling for time, seeking clarification,)

"Yes, he died and went to heaven."

"Well, you can still talk with Logan if you want to, Charles." (Even as the words left my mouth I knew they weren't really what he needed to hear. His imaginary friend wouldn't have **died** if he still needed to talk with him...but this is what I need to say because *I'm* feeling so distressed by this death of a person who has never existed.)

"I can talk to him?" Charles asks.

"Sure, you can."

"God lives in our hearts," Charles responds.

An interesting transition, I'm thinking. "That's true," I answer.

"But when you get to heaven, God doesn't live in your heart anymore."

Well, this is the second bombshell in five minutes! First, I learn that imaginary friends can **die**, and now I find out that God won't always dwell within me?? "Charles," I'm thinking to myself, "can I go back to making fuzzy sheep with yarn and cardboard? I wasn't at all prepared for this theological conversation in the middle of the Advent Workshop!"

But I get up the courage and ask, "Where **is** God when you get to heaven?"

And then in that voice that says, "I can't believe you don't know the answer to that question,"

Charles replies, "God's not in your heart because when you get to heaven, you **SEE** God."

Our story today is about life and death and grief and heaven and seeing God.

As much as I love the other gospels, I am grateful for John and the uniqueness of his narrative. While we don't have any parables, we do have "signs," John's word for miracles. There are seven. Three healings, feeding of the 5,000, walking on water, and, finally, the raising of Lazarus, his final sign. Until Easter, when we have the 8th day of creation, the 8th sign, when Christ himself is resurrected.

It is in this chapter of John, that we experience a significant shift. The first ten chapters have been the story of Jesus' ministry, but in chapter eleven, we find ourselves on the bridge that

carries us into the passion narrative. We move from the "book of signs" to the "book of glory," and in this one chapter we are given a glimpse of that glory. What a gift this is. We are preparing once again to enter into Holy Week, and we all know that, while there will be poignant moments, the truth is that after the "hosannas" fade away, the path is fraught with dangers *now* just as it was for Jesus. The path is one we'd rather not take...

God knows this...

So before we turn, like Christ, towards the dangers of Jerusalem, before we journey to the cross with Christ, God gives us a resurrection story. And just in case we might miss it God paints this story in vivid details. A man allowed to die, a tomb, a stone that is rolled away, grave clothes. Lazarus. Jesus. Jesus. Lazarus.

"I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus says. He does not say, "I *will be* the resurrection and the life;" he says "I am." Here, now, among you. And then he performs a sign because speaking powerful words is never enough.

He links words and actions.

He calls Lazarus from the tomb. Lazarus acts out for us the promise of Christ's resurrection. But is it only for us? Or is it also for **Jesus** that this story must take place?

Can we even begin to imagine how this experience must have felt for Jesus? Not only is he dealing with the death of a beloved friend, but he is placing himself on the road to the cross. Were we to continue reading to the end of the chapter, we would see that, according to John, it is the raising of Lazarus that prompts the religious leaders to begin plotting Jesus' death. Lazarus' new life and Jesus' death go hand in hand. So Jesus stands outside the tomb and calls in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out! Knowing that he has sealed his fate.

As those words echoed in his ears, did he imagine himself as Lazarus? Did he imagine himself as the one being called rather than the one calling? Can we hope that this image was some comfort to Christ? From the cross would he recall that just as he could not abandon the one he loved, God could never, never abandon him? It is a gift to us. But the raising of Lazarus is in some mysterious way a gift given from parent to child, from God to Christ, an acknowledgement of the pain and the promise that lie before him. "If you had only been here," Martha said to Jesus. And again, Mary says the same thing. "If you had only been here!" But he was not there in body. He could not have been there. Things had to unfold in this way. Things will continue to unfold in God's time...But Jesus was not there and Lazarus has died.

Christ, grieving and troubled, gives two commandments. First he calls Lazarus to come out. Commands him to leave his tomb behind. And here's where it gets interesting. Lazarus comes out, but he is bound from head to foot, wrapped in burial cloths. His face is veiled. As Lazarus stumbles to the light, Jesus gives a second command. "Unbind him and let him go!" Jesus cries.

It is Christ, and only Christ who has the power to call Lazarus from death to life.

It is also Christ who calls those gathered at the tomb to set Lazarus free in order that he might live the new life to which he has been called. First Christ **acts**, then Christ **invites** others to join with him in the work of resurrection. Can you imagine Mary and Martha and the others running forward to tear the bindings away? With tears streaming down their faces, they loosen the strips around his ankles and legs so that he can walk with a strong step. They remove the veil from his eyes so that he may see clearly.

What does Lazarus see? Probably not Christ, but rather the community gathered around him. The community which embodies Christ's love by unbinding him. This was not something Lazarus could do for himself, or Christ would have commanded *him* to do it.

The message of *Easter* morning is very clear: Jesus greets the women and sends them out to tell the good news to the others. Jesus greets us and sends us out to tell the good news. The message of *this* resurrection is also clear. While it is Christ who restores life, we are called to be participants with Christ in the work of resurrection!

What does this mean for us, Christ's community gathered here today?

We gather at the font each Sunday to name those ways that we entomb ourselves, one another, and our world. We confess our mistakes, individually and corporately. And the good news is that we *are* forgiven people. But there is a distinction between *being* a forgiven people and *living* as forgiven people. For some of us it's claiming the forgiveness that is difficult, but for most of us it is the living out of that forgiveness that trips us up. Are we willing to leave those things behind in the tomb as Christ calls us to new life?

Inside that cave there is quiet and calm and rest. Sweet smelling herbs and clean linen grave clothes...but the tomb is not where life happens. It has the power – if we allow it – to be a transformative place, through which we move from the life that we live into greater depths of living.

The Lazarus who emerged from the tomb that day could not possibly have been the same man who had entered it four days earlier. Even if he was thankful to be reborn, we can still imagine him asking the question, "why?" "Why was I reborn? For what purpose?" What would he do differently? What in him had died during those four days? He would also be faced with the question of why Jesus had waited. What is this mysterious timing of God's that had allowed him to die?

I can hear myself asking the same questions...What is this mysterious timing of God's in our own lives? "If you had only been here," Mary and Martha – independently – both said to Christ. Which is exactly the point. For reasons both within and beyond our human understanding Lazarus had to be allowed to die. For reasons both within and beyond our human understanding, we will experience deaths and rebirths.

Dare we ask ourselves, "What do I need to leave behind in that tomb?" We can and must answer this question. How do I entomb myself? What crippling patterns have I allowed into my life? How do I entomb others? What prejudices, assumptions and insecurities allow me to entomb those around me? And on a systemic level, we do the same thing. We entomb others through poverty and illiteracy and unnecessary suffering. And we know that both oppressors and the oppressed suffer in this dynamic.

There are tombs everywhere.

But these tombs have already been opened. The stones that block the way have already been moved. God has already done this. These caves stand open, just waiting for us to hobble out. Sadly, we can't come running out, with grave cloths left behind. That was for Christ. For us, leaving the tomb isn't effortless, which is why Christ commands us to be present to unbind one another. Unbinding is a process. It took us time to get this way, after all. It will take time for us to get untangled.

Together we unbind all of God's children as we work for change in our community and in our world. In God's name we empty as many tombs as we can. This is work we are passionate about, and on some level, it is easier because we are working together.

Are we willing to gather at the tomb and do that difficult work of unbinding one another individually? How will I feel about allowing someone close enough to unbind me? Humbled? Embarrassed? I doubt that Lazarus had time to feel much more than bewilderment and amazement. I doubt he had time to be embarrassed. But that's where we often go, isn't it? "I can't let anyone know what has me entombed," we say to ourselves. So we struggle along, resurrected people, constricted by our bindings.

How ridiculous we look! Our heads covered, causing us to bump into things, our feet bound together so that at best all we can do is hop around. We stumble and fall needlessly when we close ourselves off from the very ones who can set us free. It wasn't Christ's face Lazarus first gazed upon. It was the face of the one unbinding him. Christ would not be on this earth much longer, so he showed us, again, that we must be the face of Christ to one another. It is the Spirit which empowers us, which graces us to unbind one another. In the unbinding, the Spirit is set free.

That Advent night, Charles and I talked for a few more moments about Logan, and then Charles, in the wonderful way of a three year old, was ready to move on. He had a trick to show me... He became completely consumed with making his hand disappear inside his sleeve. I naturally responded in genuine horror and concern over what had happened. Then his hand would suddenly and magically reappear! He repeated this joke over and over. We knew our roles. I would act frightened and concerned and he would laugh at having tricked me yet again. It was as if he knew we both needed to laugh, we both needed consolation after the sad news of Logan's passing. And of all the practical jokes to play, he chose a joke about loss and restoration. He linked story and action. One moment his hand was gone; the next it was restored with every finger intact. His hand was gone. His hand was back. Over and over. "Don't worry, Ms Cathy," Charles was saying to me, was saying to himself. "Don't worry, about my hand. It's not really gone." "Don't worry about Logan," Charles was saying to both of us. "He's okay." Don't worry about death. Death does not get the final say.

Charles never left his hand inside that sleeve. Restoration and renewal and rejoicing are where the story ends. Over and over again, we experience death and renewal. We bind and unbind, and when we are able we allow the veil to be removed for our eyes, so that we, like Charles' friend, Logan, can see the face of God. Right here. In one another's eyes. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,
Do you know how deeply you are loved?
You are loved by God, who has rolled all stones away.
You are loved by Christ, who calls you to come out of your tomb.
You are loved by the Spirit, by whose grace, you may be unbound.

So let us go into the world to join God in that amazing work of resurrection.
Amen.