

“From Death to an Unbound Life”
Sermon from John 11:32-44
Given Sunday, August 15, 2021
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
Reverend Erika Marksbury, Senior Pastor

When Mary got to Jesus, she fell at his feet and said, “If you had been here, Lazarus never would have died.”

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the other mourners as well, he was troubled in spirit, moved by the deepest emotions.

“Where have you laid him?” Jesus asked.

“Come and see,” they said. And Jesus wept. The people in the crowd began to remark, “See how much he loved him!” Others said, “He made the blind person see; why couldn’t he have done something to prevent Lazarus’ death?”

Jesus was again deeply moved. They approached the tomb, which was a cave with a stone in front of it. “Take away the stone,” Jesus directed.

Martha said, “Rabbi, it has been four days now. By this time there will be a stench.”

Jesus replied, “Didn’t I assure you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took the stone away.

Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and said, “Abba, thank you for having heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd, so that they might believe that you sent me.” Then Jesus called out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” And Lazarus came out of the tomb, still bound hand and foot with linen strips, his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus told the crowd, “Untie him and let him go free.”

—
What is saving your life right now?

Barbara Brown Taylor, whom some of you have read before - I know the Chapel class has used her books - she writes in her memoir *Leaving Church* that once when she was invited to speak, the host gave her that assignment. “Tell us what is saving your life right now.” She said she found it such a good question, she’s continued to ask it of herself, and of other people or groups she’s been with, ever since.

I wonder, what’s the first thing you think of when you hear that question? I won’t ask you to speak it out loud, just to listen to the answer that arises within you - don’t censor it, don’t judge it, just let it come: What is saving your life right now?

We’ve asked this question here before, but it was a few years back. I wonder how our current season would change our answers. During quarantine, as much as we like to grumble about zoom, I was part of several groups where people admitted on screen, “these sessions are saving my life right now.” For some of us, lately, it’s been a small group, a pod, that we were able to meet with for dinner - the only other people we saw for a year, but at least we saw them. For some it was the fact that we could still get outside, still go for walks or bike rides. For some it was the slowing down, the encouragement to be alone, to be still, for once. For some it was cooking at home again, or discovering a new poet, or picking up an old instrument.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “Salvation is so much more than many of its proponents would have us believe. In the Bible, human beings experience God’s salvation when peace ends war, when food follows famine, when health supplants sickness and freedom trumps oppression. Salvation is a word for the divine spaciousness that comes to human beings in all the tight places where their lives are at risk, regardless of how they got there or whether they know God’s name.” She goes on, “Sometimes it comes as an extended human hand and sometimes as a bolt from the blue, but either way it opens a door in what looked for all the world like a wall. This is the way of life, and God alone knows how it works.”

What is killing you?

That’s the other side of it, right? That’s the assumption that this question carries along with it. If something is saving our lives, right now, something is also trying to kill us. Or it sure feels that way.

I wonder which question is easier to answer - what’s killing you, or what’s saving your life right now? I wonder if the answer - or the ease - varies day by day.

In our story, a sickness killed Lazarus. And the heartache is killing Mary and Martha. And everyone in the story seems to believe that it didn’t have to be this way. “If you had been here, Jesus, everything would be different. If you had just done what we had hoped - if you had just been who we wanted you to be, who we

know you to be, who you have been for these other people - everything would be different. But you know us, you claim to love us, and you didn't show up for us."

When the sisters say, "If you'd been here, Jesus, Lazarus wouldn't have died," that's partially a statement of faith. But it's also an accusation. It's a demand for an explanation. It's a confession that this betrayal is killing them.

And I don't know about you, but I find Jesus' answer here almost totally unsatisfactory. He says, "Yeah, yeah, you're right, things could have been different - but I've got a point to make here." And then this same guy who has told people to pray in private, to not make a show of it, prays specifically so that people will overhear what he's saying, tells God, "This is all for their benefit," and then he tells the people to roll away the stone. The crowd of mourners that's gathered - the people who were there on time, but couldn't stop it; the people who have come to be with Mary and Martha in their grief - Jesus tells them, take the stone away.

And Martha tries to say, "It's too late. You're too late for that. He's dead." She admits that there will be a smell. She and her sister have applied the anointing oils, the ones for burial, but it's been four days, and she knows that the power of death will have overcome the prettiness they tried to cover it with. This game is killing her.

Jesus says, "What have I told you?"

And the people - in my mind this is how it goes - the people give Jesus one more chance.

And then Jesus calls to their dead friend, and he lives again.

I mean, now - when Lazarus hasn't asked for it, when the sisters have given up hope, when the crowd is discouraged and angry - now, Jesus shows up. The people gathered could've been spared all that pain, but they weren't. And Jesus does shed some tears with them here, but for a good while, it sure looked like, felt like, they were alone in that pain.

But then - just as I'm getting all worked up about Jesus not being there when he should have, just as I'm ready to say this justifying and proving is killing me, too - Jesus invites everybody in, close to the stench. Because this life-giving isn't work he can do alone. Lazarus emerges from the grave, but stumbling, his hands and feet still bound. And Jesus tells the people - "set him free."

And you know, the miracle Jesus did isn't much good without that part. What kind of life is it, to be breathing but still bound?

As much as there is in this story that is difficult, or frustrating, or nonsensical, this is the part of it that saves me: this call to come near what's awfully hard to get near, and to call it back to the land of the living together. Maybe the stench is killing them. But maybe, as they unwind the burial cloths from their friend, piece by piece, they know themselves to be part of life-saving work. And maybe they recognize the places in their own lives where

expectations and assumptions, judgments and grudges, have kept them bound. Maybe, as they pass the end of a piece of cloth to a neighbor, as they watch how that neighbor carefully, tenderly, unwinds it from Lazarus' ankle, they can imagine their own freedom. And maybe that knowing, maybe that imagining, can save their lives, too.

Let's pray...

Holy and Gracious God,

We yearn for freedom, for a life that is unbound, except by love.

We sometimes feel like there's a lot that's trying to kill us -

We know that for some of us, that threat is more literal than for others, and we ask that we might be present for one another in it.

*But God, for all that is saving our lives right now -
we give thanks.*

For those who give us second chances;

for those who come alongside and offer a glimpse of a new way;

*for those who come near, when we are at our worst, who call us
again back to who you have created us to be - we give thanks.*

And for every chance we get to do that for each other,

We ask for courage. We ask for compassion. And we give thanks.

Amen.