

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“The Cave of Resistance”
John 11
February 18, 2018

On the first Sunday of Lent our lectionary has landed us in the last of the seven signs that Jesus performs in the Gospel of John. Several weeks ago I talked about how one of the unique characteristics of John’s gospel is his use of signs.

The first sign was the water into wine at the wedding. And today we have the last sign with the raising of Lazarus.

Another unique characteristic of John is that this story is what sets in motion the plot to kill Jesus, which makes it a good story for the beginning of Lent. It’s a little different than the other three gospels. In those the crucifixion is set in motion when Jesus turns over the table in the temple.

But John tells things in a different order.

He has a unique perspective.

And the way John tells it; the cross really begins with this controversial story about Lazarus.

Thursday morning at breakfast I was telling Elijah, Brandt, and Theo about how I was going to be preaching on this story. They didn’t exactly remember the story, so I told them all about it.

And Elijah had a brilliant insight about the story. In fact, I asked him if it was OK if I shared with you all what he said, and he told me I could.

After telling him about Jesus’ conversation with Martha and then Mary, and Jesus weeping, and then going to the tomb, and calling Lazarus from the tomb, and him rising from the dead, Elijah said, “Well, that’s creepy!” “That’s scary.”

He’s right. It is, isn’t it?

It’s a little scary. You almost can’t help but think of shows like, “The Walking Dead.”

On a very real, honest, gut level, this story is kind of creepy.

And maybe that’s at least partly why there is this constant resistance to what Jesus is doing throughout this story. It’s there all long the way.

You see it in the disciples,

the sisters,

the crowds...

It starts back at the beginning of the chapter. Jesus gets news that Lazarus is sick, and the text says that Jesus just stayed put for a few days. It seems odd to us, but it doesn’t seem to bother the disciples.

In fact, when Jesus decides to go and visit Lazarus, that’s when they give him some pretty significant push back. You see, Jesus and the disciples are in a bit of an exile here. They’ve crossed to the wilderness side of the Jordan because at the end of chapter 10, a whole bunch of folks tried to stone Jesus.

So when he decides to go back to Bethany, the disciples think he’s crazy. They try to change his mind. They argue with him. They try to reason with him, but Jesus won’t be stopped.

So finally they give in. In fact, it's Thomas that caves first. "Well, we can't let him die alone. Let's go and die with him."

Jesus begins to make his way, but before he even arrives in Bethany Martha comes out. And Martha has a few words for him. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

There's some accusation in her words, isn't there? She's not beating it around the bush. Before Jesus can even get to Bethany, Martha stops him. "It's too late, Jesus. You should have come earlier. Not sure what good you'll do now."

Jesus talks with Martha, but he doesn't finish his journey. He still hadn't come to the village, verse 30 says, when Mary runs out and lays the same criticism at his feet. In fact, if you look closely you'll see that Martha and Mary say the exact same thing, verbatim. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Now we all know how that happens, right? When two people make the same accusation, word for word? That means ***they've been talkin'***.

These are no spontaneous comments.

It's what they've been saying to each other for days now.

In their anger. In their confusion. In their grief. They've been talkin'.

We all know how that works, right? We're all guilty of it from time to time. Our complaint emboldens somebody else's complaint.

Their words become our words.

Our criticism, their criticism... until there's no filter left because it's the shared version of events. ***Everyone's saying the same thing.***

And now each of them, Martha and Mary, has come out and laid the exact same accusations at Jesus' feet. They are angry. They are hurt and there is resistance in their words. They stop him before he even gets to town.

Jesus sees under their words. He sees all the pain, the grief, and he is profoundly moved by their sorrow. He weeps, the scriptures say. But even in his weeping, there is more accusation. The crowd now picks it up. "Couldn't he have done something?" Which is to say, "If he really cared, why didn't he do something?"

Even Jesus' weeping is resisted.

But Jesus keeps moving closer...

He leans in. "Again, greatly disturbed," John writes, Jesus finally comes to the tomb.

Finally.

It's taken 38 verses.

That's a long time when you're writing it out by hand in ancient Greek.

It takes 38 verses.... and Jesus finally arrives.

He's come to Bethany.

He's made it to the tomb.

And everyone assumes his journey is now over.

But there is still something between him... and Lazarus.

There is still a profound resistance blocking his way. John describes it as a cave. Dark and solid. A cave shut off with a large stone.

And just like he has this entire story, Jesus sees the resistance and leans in.
“Roll back the stone,” he says.

Everyone’s eyes grow wide. “He’s got to be crazy. There’s no way we’re going to do that,” they’re thinking.

It was Martha who finally spoke up. “You don’t want to go in there, Jesus. Lazarus has been in there for days. It wouldn’t be a pretty sight, Jesus.

The stench... It would be too much, Jesus.

Don’t go in there.”

All along the way... with every step Jesus takes,
as Jesus moves closer and closer in,
their resistance grows stronger...

just like ours tends to do.

Let’s be honest. We all have a Lazarus or two locked up in a dark stone cave... don’t we?¹

Some things are just too unpleasant to let out.

Some painful event from our past?

Some part of ourselves that we loathe?

Maybe some regret we’ve carried that we don’t want to even acknowledge?

Lazarus might look different for you than he does for me. But you can recognize him by the way that you keep him locked up,

hidden away... from others,

hidden away from yourself,

and even... or maybe especially... hidden from God.

If Jesus starts to get closer... we resist. There are some things that are just hard to ever let see the light of day again. After all, it has the stench of death all over it. And so we keep it locked up tight.

No one’s going in.

And certainly nothing’s coming out.

But today we begin Lent.

And part of the Lenten journey is entering the places of wilderness with Jesus.

And the wilderness is the place of uncertainty,

where we do not have control.

It’s the place of wildness,

where we do not feel safe.

It’s the place of loneliness, where we do not have the esteem of our colleagues to depend on.

It’s the place where our successes in life don’t count for much.

The wilderness is a place where we may just have to face the things we’ve been keeping locked up, the things we’ve been too afraid to let out:

¹ Internal Family Systems theory describes these as our “exiled” parts. See Richard C. Schwartz, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, Revised ed. (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997).

your anger...
a deep wound...
a fear...
a dream that long died...
a profound regret.

I don't know what is dead in you, but I do know that all of us have that same stone cave of resistance. And whatever dead Lazarus we've put in there... we will do just about anything to keep it there... locked up.

And so we're really practiced
at resisting any attempt by Jesus to go there.

"Let's go to this place where Lazarus died," Jesus says.
And like the disciples, we resist: "Jesus, it's not safe, there."
Jesus... goes anyway.

Some parts of you want him to go, but some other parts of you... some Martha or Mary in you, stops him before he arrives. "But Jesus, if only you had kept this from ever happening in the first place. Where were you?"

There's a mixture of anger, and accusation, and grief in your voice.

Jesus sees your pain and your fears. And his heart breaks for you.
He weeps... for you.
And he weeps... for what you've had to keep locked away.

I know... that can be hard to believe... because what's in there is so ugly. It's too far-gone. And there is a cluster of voices that keep resisting, "If God really loved you... God wouldn't have let this happen."

But Jesus presses on. He moves closer... "Take me to Lazarus."

And maybe you do, maybe you have...
Maybe you've taken him all the way to the cave now and again.
And you thought that was far enough.

But today, as we enter the wilderness with Jesus, he's pressing in deeper. "Roll away the stone," he says.

Everything in you resists. Because there is something in there you're not ready to encounter. It's too much.

Do you even know what it is? What is hiding in that dark place? What stench? What rotting wound? What uncertainty? What unanswered question?

A lot of times we've tucked it so far down we're not even aware.
Until Jesus says, "You think I've come all the way, but there is more. Roll away the stone."
"Trust me," Jesus says. "Stop resisting, and just trust."

[Pause]

We don't know who was the brave soul that finally stepped forward, but somebody ...did.
They rolled back the stone.

And Jesus prays. And then he speaks.

“Lazarus, come out!”

Elijah was right. That is scary.

Especially when it happens. Because when it does, whatever you’ve kept buried in there is all bound up, hands and feet and face.

It was just part of the burial process, a part of the coping mechanism to keep it hidden away.

And so there’s one last thing Jesus says.

One last invitation, one last thing he asks you to do:

“Unbind him, and let him go!”

Can you do that?

Will you do that?

Unbind him... and let him go, Jesus says.

I wonder what this might look like for you?

“I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus tells Martha.

“I know that there will be new life at the end of time,” she responds.

“No, you’re missing the point. I am the resurrection and the life... even now.”

I have come that Lazarus might be healed now and that you might have life now.

This is the journey that Lent invites us to.

This is what can happen in the wilderness with Jesus.

For the next 40 days we are invited to recognize all the ways we keep resisting God... and begin to allow God to move closer and closer.

Yes, that can be terrifying.

But Jesus is leaning in saying,

“It’s time.

Roll away the stone.

Unbind Lazarus.

Let him go.”

Amen.

Silent Reflection:

*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life,
nor angels, nor rulers,
nor things present, nor things to come,
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

~Romans 8:38-39