

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner  
March 9, 2008  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent  
John 11:1-53

### **Binding and Loosing**

*(The Scripture is read throughout the sermon)*

#### **Unbind him and let him go.**

The tension is beginning to mount in this Gospel of John. Already in the background you hear the drumbeats of the empire; you hear the murmuring of the threatened priests; you hear the groaning of a world still fighting the powers of death.

#### **Unbind him and let him go.**

*1-6 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup>Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup>So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, \* 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' <sup>4</sup>But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' <sup>5</sup>Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, <sup>6</sup>after having heard that Lazarus \* was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*

The disciples and Jesus had just escaped from the threat of being stoned in Judea. The offending charge? Jesus had healed a man who had been born blind. You would think that folks would jump for joy! One who was blind now sees. And yet, instead of gathering confetti for a celebration, they gathered stones for Jesus' destruction. Why? Because Jesus had done this healing on the Sabbath day. He had broken sacred law.

Furthermore, when Jesus restored sight to the blind man, he exposed the spiritual blindness of all the others. And they were furious. Furious that Jesus had the gall to think he could break the Sabbath law. Furious that Jesus had the gall to heal a man who was obviously blind for a reason—sin! And, furious that, because of that act of healing, people were beginning to believe in this Jesus fellow. And so, instead of confetti, they picked up stones. And the powers of death picked up speed.

Jesus and the disciples escaped and went away for a while. While they were there, he received word that his good friend Lazarus was very sick. Mary and Martha wanted Jesus to come back to Bethany in Judea at once. But, Jesus decided to stay where he was for two more days. A decision we may not like. A decision we may indeed question. But, nonetheless, a decision Jesus made.

#### **Unbind him and let him go.**

*7-16 Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' <sup>8</sup>The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' <sup>9</sup>Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. <sup>10</sup>But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' <sup>11</sup>After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' <sup>12</sup>The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' <sup>13</sup>Jesus, however, had been speaking about Lazarus' death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. <sup>14</sup>Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. <sup>15</sup>For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may*

*believe. But let us go to him.’<sup>16</sup> Thomas, who was called the Twin,<sup>\*</sup> said to his fellow-disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.*

When Jesus said “Let’s go back now to Judea,” the disciples thought that was the worst idea he had ever had. Was he crazy? They had almost been stoned in Judea. Had Jesus already forgotten? They had not forgotten. They had not forgotten what it felt like to be frozen, bound, in fear. They had not forgotten what it felt like to hear the religious leaders plotting to arrest Jesus for his ministry. They had not forgotten how terribly dangerous the situation was. The disciples got it. They knew that if they went back, if he went back, they might all be killed. Their fear bound them so tightly they could barely breathe.

### **Unbind them and let them go.**

But Jesus was not to be deterred. He answered with words about daylight, nighttime and stumbling. He was not bound by fear. Why should they be? They knew who he was, didn’t they? Didn’t they realize he was the light of the world? Didn’t they know that he would be with them?

They would not stumble. He would light their way. Surely they knew this by now. They had listened to his teaching. They had watched his healings. They had seen the crowds growing by day, more and more people drawn to belief. Surely they knew they need not be bound by fear. The powers of death were picking up speed, but Jesus was not afraid. “Lazarus is dead,” he said. We have to go. Don’t you understand who I am yet?

### **Unbind them and let them go.**

*When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.<sup>18</sup> Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles<sup>\*</sup> away,<sup>19</sup> and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother.<sup>20</sup> When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.<sup>21</sup> Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.<sup>22</sup> But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.’<sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’<sup>24</sup> Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’<sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life.<sup>\*</sup> Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,<sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’<sup>27</sup> She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah,<sup>\*</sup> the Son of God, the one coming into the world.’*

“Lord, if you had been here,” Martha spoke, “my brother would not have died.” Martha could not help but say exactly what she felt. She did not try to put on a brave face. She did not try to pretend that she was any stronger than she was. She laid it all out there for Jesus to see. For she was bound by her grief and her deep sense of betrayal. If he had just been on time, her brother would not have died. Why wasn’t Jesus there in time? Why hadn’t God answered her prayers in time? Why? It did not make sense to her. Was Jesus not who he said he was?

### **Unbind her and let her go.**

Jesus saw her agony. He had asked her, point-blank, if she believed he was the resurrection and the life. “Yes Lord,” Martha had stated, with about as much enthusiasm as some of you show when you recite the Apostles’ Creed. Jesus had confronted her about her beliefs and she had said what she had learned. But, she was so bound by her grief and deep sense of betrayal that all she could do was recite what she

had been taught in her mind, rather than say what she knew in her heart. Jesus saw this. He saw how bound she was by her grief and her deep sense of betrayal. And he understood.

### **Unbind her and let her go.**

*When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, ‘The Teacher is here and is calling for you.’<sup>29</sup> And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.<sup>31</sup> The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there.<sup>32</sup> When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’<sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.<sup>34</sup> He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’<sup>35</sup> Jesus began to weep.<sup>36</sup> So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’<sup>37</sup> But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?’*

Mary echoed her sister’s words of grief and betrayal. As a matter of fact, even those called “the Jews” in John’s Gospel were asking similar questions of Jesus. Didn’t he just heal that blind man? Why did he not heal Lazarus? If he is who he says he is, why didn’t he stop Lazarus from dying?

And Jesus heard all of those voices all around him. And he looked at Mary and Martha. He thought about Lazarus. He heard everyone, probably even his disciples, murmuring their disbelief that he had not acted on time, and he wept. He was angry. He was distressed. Jesus suddenly found himself wrestling with their attempts to bind him with their disappointment in him and their disbelief.

Had his disciples not learned anything about who he was? Had Mary and Martha not really learned anything about who he was? Despite all they had witnessed in his ministry, did they really think Jesus was impotent in the face of Lazarus’ death? Jesus saw Mary and Martha. He looked into the faces of his disciples. He could hear all the murmurings of the crowd. And Jesus, himself, wrestled against being bound by anger, by grief, maybe by loneliness. Did they still not know who he was?

“I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus had told Martha. “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” And yet, she was so bound by grief and betrayal, she had not been able to hear. And earlier, he had spoken of being the light with his disciples, promising them he would not let them stumble for he was with them. And yet, they had been so bound by fear, they had not been able to hear.

And now, now he was on his way to the tomb of his friend and everyone had already assumed that nothing could change or be different. They were trying to bind him with their own expectations of who he was and what he was able to do. They were trying to bind him with their own doubts over his ability to be resurrection and new life. They were trying to bind him with their own fear that he really was not who he claimed to be and that nothing would ever truly change. And Jesus knew that the powers of death were picking up speed and he heard the murmurings of the authorities and the drumbeat of the empire.

### **Unbind me and let me go.**

*Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.<sup>39</sup> Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.’<sup>40</sup> Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?’<sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards*

*and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup>I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' <sup>43</sup>When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' <sup>44</sup>The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.*

No one knew what to do, really. At that moment, as Lazarus came out of the tomb, no one could even believe what they were seeing. But, they heard Jesus' call to unbind him and to let him go and they obeyed. And as Mary and Martha unwrapped their brother Lazarus from the graveclothes that had kept him captured, some of the disciples felt their fear being unwrapped from around their hearts. It did not completely disappear, but it did was not as constrictive. They started to breathe again.

And as Mary and Martha unwrapped the graveclothes from Lazarus' face and they saw his eyes, they felt their grief and betrayal unraveling from their spirits. They were reeling from this resurrection that they could not have imagined. But Martha found herself remembering Jesus' words to her earlier that day. "Martha, I am the resurrection and the life." And as she stared in her brother's eyes, she felt her faith moving from residing only in her mind to living a bit more in her heart, as well. And she and Mary started to breathe again.

And Jesus looked around at Mary and Martha. He looked into the faces of his disciples. He heard the excited talk coming from the people gathered around. And he shook off all the ways they had tried to bind him that day—with their fear, their grief, their sense of betrayal, their deep disappointment, their disbelief and their doubt that he **was** who he was. And Jesus started to breathe again.

*45-48, 53: Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, 'What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.' ... So from that day on they planned to put him to death.*

But in response to the unbinding, the loosing and the freedom; in response to the new life and the new breath and the new possibilities shared by all who stood at the door of the empty tomb; the drumbeat of the empire's army began to get louder. And the murmurings of the threatened priests began to grow sharper. And the powers of death began to pick up speed. And Jesus' own graveclothes began to be stitched together.