

## HOW CAN I KEEP BELIEVING?

A sermon delivered to the congregation of Calvary Baptist Church of Denver on April 10, 2011 by Mary Armacost Hulst, Pastor Emerita.

Biblical monologue of Mary of Bethany – based on John 11:1-45 (Delivered in costume while holding a first century Roman glass tear cup)

There are moments in life when words cannot carry the weight of the anguish of the human heart. Sometimes only tears can express deep heartache. Such was the moment when my brother Lazarus died. My tears were so abundant that I needed many more than one small tear cup. The tears splashed over the top running off on the ground in streams of my heartache.

It happened so fast. Lazarus was suddenly seriously ill. Martha and I sent a message to Jesus, knowing he was the one who could make things better. The message was simple and short, “Lord, the one that you love is ill.” We used no names. That would have been dangerous for Jesus. The religious authorities had stoned him here in Judea, and they were waiting for him to do something for which they could arrest him to get him out of the way. We knew it was risky for him to come, but we needed him. He did not come, hard though that was for us to believe. Lazarus had been dead for four days before Jesus made his way up the road to Bethany.

Martha learned first that he was nearing our village. She confronted him on the road. It was only later that I learned that we both used the same words in greeting him. Through tears, Martha challenged, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Distressed, but with confidence, Jesus said, “Martha, your brother will rise.” “I know Lord, on the last day in the great resurrection, Lazarus will rise.” Jesus, sensing that Martha was asking for something far more immediate than a resurrection at end times, said to her, “Martha, I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me will live, those who live and believe in me will never die. Do you believe that?” “Lord”, responded, Martha, “you know I believe. You are the Messiah.” Before Martha could ask anymore of Jesus he asked her to go and get me.

I can hear her yet, bursting into the house. “Mary, Mary, the Teacher is asking for you.” She had barely finished her sentence when I was running out the door and down the road to see the Lord I so trusted and loved. Tears blinded my steps. I fell to my knees and clutched the

hem of Jesus' robe and with anguish said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." I can still feel the gentle and tender touch of his hands on my shoulders as he helped me to stand in front of him. He asked where we had laid my brother and then deeply distressed, Jesus wept. We stood together weeping for the one that we had lost. We were not alone by then. Most of the village had joined us; the extended family, the town folk, the mourners.

We made our way then to the tomb. It was a cave on the side of the hill just outside of Bethany. With no other words, Jesus stood in front of the cave and stretched out his arms. There was an energy and strength to him I have never seen before. His dark eyes were intense, the veins on his neck almost like cords as he said, "Lazarus, come out." There was no sound. My heart beat furiously inside me. And then just a whisper of noise, a scraping on the bedrock, and slowly Lazarus emerged. He could hardly move. The grave cloths hobbled his feet and his arms were pressed tight to his body. A last word from Jesus, spoken to those of us who watched. "Unbind him and let him go." Oh how quickly we moved to do just that.

In the midst of my joy that day, and yes there was an abundance of that, there were questions too. There was both miracle and mystery. I found myself thinking I needed to keep my tear cup near at hand.

(Musical interlude of a brief somewhat discordant Lenten piece)

#### REFLECTION ON THE STORY

That music, like the story told by Mary of Bethany, leaves us unsettled and unsure. It makes us feel a bit out of sync. The Lenten season does that and it is intended to do. Lent is a time that walks us through the valley of the shadow. It is a time of moving to and through Good Friday. I was critiqued some years ago for allowing an organist to play a piece of music during the offertory that was discordant and a bit difficult to hear. It was a piece that had been composed for Lent. As I reflected on the criticism I found myself thinking that there were two great misunderstandings going on. The first is that a pastor who has hired a competent organist does not select and approve the music played in worship. The second and greater misunderstanding was the lack of understanding Lent. It is not a time of happy hallelujahs. During Lent we have to walk through the cemetery to get to Easter morn. The story of Lazarus is a cemetery story.

There is a familiarity to the story though, isn't there. The words are words we have heard. We have heard them at services we have attended. "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." We cling to those words. They give us reassurance and comfort and hope. There are other things to which we need to cling in that story as well.

JESUS WEPT WITH THOSE HE LOVED...HE STILL DOES!

"Jesus wept" is a two word verse that grants incredible theological truth. Those words are a lens into the character of God. God in Christ joined us in our life journey. God in Christ is present in the joys and the sorrows, present in laughter and tears.

At the time that Jesus lived, there was a philosophy of life lived by many called stoicism. It was a way of living that promoted the stiff upper lip. One could control life if he or she did not display any emotion. Apathy was the way to stay in charge. Then along came Jesus, a man of deep compassion. The word literally means, "with suffering." *Com pati* with suffering. Jesus enters into the suffering with us and Jesus did with Martha and Mary. Jesus wept. That is the character of our God.

I love the old rabbinic tale of Moses crossing the Red Sea. The waters were parted. The children of Israel had made their way to the other side. As they arrived on safe ground, Moses lifted his staff, the waters crashed together and the Egyptians were swept to their death. There was great celebration by the citizens of heaven, lots of high-fiving and clapping and then one of the angels noticed that God was not looking joyful. The angel asked why. "Why God are you not celebrating with us? Your chosen people are safe." "I know," said God, as tears streamed down God's face, but the Egyptians are my people too." That is the kind of God we have.

It was Lord Byron who said, "You can see farther through a tear than through a telescope." Jesus could see into the heart of Mary and Martha and Jesus wept. Jesus wept with compassion for his friends. He wept for his own loss of a friend. He wept for the fragility of life. He wept for the unfairness of death. He wept for the overwhelming size of the task entrusted to him. He wept for the loneliness of it. He wept for the world and he still does. He wept this week for the twelve children in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, who were killed at an elementary school.

He wept this week for lives lost in the places of conflict and war in our world. He wept this week for people who lost their homes in a fire. He wept this week for people that were hurting.

The ancients seemed to know something that we seem not to. Rather than being stoic, letting the tears flow is therapeutic. Do you know that studies have been done on the chemical makeup of tears of joy and tears of sorrow. Tears of sorrow are full of toxic chemicals. Collecting those tears as mourners did in Jesus day, was a road to healing. Shedding those tears made room for grace and healing. Jesus wept. We at times need to do that more easily with him. Sharing tears is more profoundly eloquent at times than any words. Jesus wept with those he loved. He still does.

#### JESUS DEFEATED DEATH THAT DAY...HE STILL DOES

Lazarus came stumbling out of the tomb. He moved from the darkness to the light. He moved toward his friend Jesus. He crossed boundaries in those moments between death and life. I think Eugene O'Neill had it right. In 1928 he wrote a play, *Lazarus Laughed*. It was not a commercial success. It closed one week after opening on Broadway, but it had some remarkable wisdom and some beautiful thoughts. The story in the play picks up where the biblical story leaves off. Lazarus has emerged from the tomb, grave cloths paralyzing him. He is helped out of the linen strips and then he begins to laugh a low gentle rolling laugh. He looks around as if it is the first time ever that he really can see clearly. With joy he takes everything in. He leans over patting the ground and says, "Yes, Yes, Yes!" Someone asks him what it is like to die. He responds explaining that death is not like the way we see it from this side. "There is no death," said Lazarus. "There is only life and God and joy. Death is a portal through which we move to everlasting growth and everlasting life. We are put here to learn to love more fully. There is nothing to fear. There is only life." Again Lazarus laughs. It is a joy that settles over the whole community.

I think in the biblical story, the gospel writer was sharing some of the mystery of life after death. In addition, I think the gospel writer was also telling us something about life before death. Lazarus had a temporary reprieve. He would have to die again at some point. Perhaps one of the truths of that story is the reminder that resurrection life can happen before death. There are, for all of us, caves or tombs that bind us. Perhaps it is a fear that holds you in its grip. Perhaps it is a hurt to which you cling. Is there an anger that colors your days?

Perhaps it is the gift of forgiveness you have been unwilling to give. Perhaps there is a guilt that weighs you down. Maybe it is an addiction, or a loss of confidence and self esteem, a loss of job, the tearing apart of family, a broken relationship. Only you know what that dark tomb might be.

In whatever tomb you may find yourself, there is a voice that calls you, saying, "Come out!" We can trust the one that calls us out of the dark to bring us into the full dawn of new life. Jesus defeated death that day. He still does. One thing more.

#### JESUS ASKED OTHERS TO HELP IN THE HEALING PROCESS...HE STILL DOES

You heard it, of course. "Unbind him and let him go," said Jesus. He was not speaking to Lazarus. Lazarus could not do that himself. He needed help. Don't we all. Breaking free of the tombs that hold us captive takes help. That is our charge and challenge. We are called when we can, to unbind those whose lives we touch. We can lovingly lift the bindings that entomb another as we love, support, encourage, pray and weep. Negative messages assault us constantly and our own lives too often are touched by personal sufferings such as illness, divorce, breaches of trust, difficult work situations or joblessness. Life can be hard to navigate and impossible alone. When we hear of the sufferings of others there is a desire to help. Our heart opens, but often there is the thought that the problem is too heavy and we back away in fear. The easy way out is to send a check, a bit of money to feed the world will help, but that does not feed or satisfy the heart. That short changes compassion. To just show up sometimes when someone is hurting and simply saying, "I am here with you," may be the real gift. Sometimes silence and being genuine are the most powerful. It gives room and space to the one whose life we are touching.

As we reach out, a remarkable transformation happens. Helping to unbind another life touches our own with the gift of wholeness and the gift of renewal. The story of Lazarus shares abundant truth about life: life on the other side of the boundary we call death and life on this side too.

This past Monday as the last game of the FINAL FOUR was to begin, there was a commercial for the NCAA, the National Collegiate Athletic Association. There was a swimmer and then the words, "This is not the last lap." There was a runner and then the words, "This is not the finish line." There was a hockey player making a goal and then the words, "This is not the final goal."

The scene then shifted to graduation. There were graduates in their caps and gowns facing away from us. On the back of a line of graduates caps were the words, "This is a beginning." Death too, is not the end. It is a beginning!

How do I keep believing? I do that because I have a Lord who cried with those he loved and he still does. I have a Lord who defeated death that day and he still does. I have a Lord who asks others to help in the healing process and he still does. That is a Lord in whom I trust and believe. Amen.