

Sermon: It All Depends
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Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

John 11:44

Have you ever had an experience where two completely unrelated things get stuck together in your memory, and then just stay there forever?

Let's say you happen to be watching *The Sound of Music* when your sister calls to tell you she had her baby.

For the rest of your life, every time you hear someone sing about brown paper packages tied up with string, you remember the moment you got the news that you were going to be an aunt or uncle for the first time.

For me, every time I read this story of Lazarus, I think of the time I first became aware of the writings of the Catholic peace activist, Father John Dear -- that's D-e-a-r. As opposed to the John Deere of farm implement fame.

I won't go into the story of how these two things are connected, as that might take us a little off track, though I have mentioned John before, mainly because his book *Jesus the Rebel* changed my understanding of Jesus forever.

He notes, for example, that as far as the religious leaders of the day were concerned, Jesus was not law-abiding or pious or conventionally reverent, as most of us might imagine him to be. Rather the Jesus of scripture was, in John's words, "a troublemaking, law-breaking, disruptive, revolutionary fanatic" (*Jesus the Rebel*, pg. 57).

Admittedly, we've explored Jesus's revolutionary actions here on a number of occasions. We've looked at how he healed on the Sabbath, in apparent violation of one of the Ten Commandments.

How he consorted with gentiles and the "unclean," in direct violation of the so-called holiness codes of his day. How he liberated women, in a patriarchal society. And how he empowered and affirmed society's outcasts, so that they were no longer outcasts.

I make this point again today because the story of Lazarus, might be the most amazing of all these accounts, for here Jesus breaks perhaps the most immutable boundary in the universe, the boundary of death itself.

Or does he? As with all the stories of the Bible, I believe we have two choices in response to this text. We can either believe that it's true, in whatever way that makes sense to us, or we can dismiss it as a kind of fairy tale.

For my part, I believe this story is true: theologically and universally true. That is, I believe it's not just about Mary and Martha and Jesus and Lazarus, but about something more immediate and personal. I believe this is a story about you and me and the world we live in.

That's a risky thing to believe, however.

Because if the story of Lazarus is true, it raises the question of what this truth might look like, or how it might pertain, in our world. A world where miracles like this don't tend to happen.

Where people who are laid to rest tend to stay at rest and are never seen again. Where our best hopes -- for ourselves, for our loved ones, for our world, sometimes die untimely deaths and never rise again.

So it's risky to believe this story was true, and even riskier to believe that it is still true. But that's nothing new, really.

All of the stories that inform our faith — the parting of the Red Sea, turning water into wine, feeding the five thousand, Easter — all of the stories are just as unlikely as this one. We don't really have the option of choosing which ones really happened and which ones are just *too* fanciful to believe.

So the question before us is this: Will we believe this and all the stories? Will we take the risk of letting them transform us and our world, or will we let the world transform them, and reduce these great and powerful stories to mere fairy tales?

Well, let's take that risk, shall we? Let's dive into this story and see where it leads us.

After an unusually long and detailed set up, the story reaches its climax when Jesus delivers this three-world command:

“Lazarus, come out!” he shouts. To his credit, Lazarus does his part. *The dead man came out*, John tells us, *his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth.*

At this point, we basically have a scene out of a zombie movie. That is, it seems more like Lazarus is undead than that he is fully alive, like his future is still hanging in the balance, and the balance could tip either way.

It also seems like Jesus himself shares this view, because he's not done shouting commands.

“Unbind him and let him go!” he implores the astonished onlookers. And with that final directive, this remarkable story abruptly ends.

Here, I think, is the take away: The truth of this story depends not just on Lazarus' willingness to get up off his death bed, but also on whether the onlookers follow through and obey that second command.

Whether they take the hard way and transcend their doubts about what they've just seen; whether they overcome their concerns about decorum and how this once dead man might smell; whether they resist their fears about having a dude that's been dead for four days walking around in their town--in short, on whether they're willing to swallow all of that and actually let him loose.

Or whether they take the easy way out and surrender to their innate skepticism about whether such things are possible and walk away.

It's a moment of genuine crisis, because if they don't follow through, Lazarus might as well turn right back around and resume his supine pose in that tomb. Cause he sure isn't going to be able to unwrap himself from those bands of death.

In the final analysis, this miracle depends, at least in part, on the onlookers. Maybe that's partly why we resist stories like this one. Because they implicate us as onlookers who bear witness to the wounds of the world.

But also because if resurrection is somehow true, and if we have a role to play in it, well, that requires us to re-write our scripts.

Resurrection requires us to imagine a world where tragedy doesn't define us. Where hope lives on even after our hardest losses, if we're prepared to participate in its rising.

Where conditions and outcomes that break our hearts aren't necessarily fixed, if we are willing to open our hearts again and to let the light of courage and wonder seep back in through the cracks.

Which brings us back to the beginning. For that is a risky thing to believe, as I was myself reminded just few days ago. Just a few minutes before I sat down to work on this sermon, I happened upon a story on CNN.com whose details eerily evoked some of the images and themes of the Lazarus story.

A camera crew based in Mosul, Iraq, was documenting the results of an airstrike on the city when they came across a little girl who'd been wounded in the bombing. Here's how they tell the story:

"I want my mommy," [the girl] mumbled while cradled in the arms of her grandmother... The four-and-a-half-year-old's lips barely move to form the weak but desperate plea.

Her face is etched with small wounds, gauze wrapped around her throat and leg over burns that have yet to heal. She can't open her eyes; there is shrapnel in one of them, the other painfully closed.

"I am thinking it's better to be dead [the grandmother says]. "I am thinking [better] to die, rather than [live] a life like this."

You hear a story like that, knowing full well how often such things happen in our world, and you think, well, that's it: Good Friday wins. Why even try to believe otherwise?

And then, just when you decide to turn and walk away into the darkness, the light of Easter begins to break through. And I know this because I watched the video of it happening.

Kaled Fahar is a Syrian national and a volunteer with an organization called White Helmets. Their mission is simple: after bombing raids like the one I just described, they go into the rubble, they roll away the stones, and they save people who are as good as dead.

In those conditions, even an “ordinary” rescue requires extraordinary courage and perseverance.

But this particular rescue was anything but ordinary. Kalid and some of his fellow White Helmet volunteers were working in a neighborhood called Ansari, which had just been hit by a cascade of so-called “barrel bombs” -- barrels filled with nails and chemicals, and dropped from the air.

The bombs had hit without warning, causing a whole row of houses to collapse on their residents--who in this case, and in most cases in Syria, happened to be completely innocent civilians. Kaled and his colleagues had managed to pull a number of survivors out of the rubble, including, at the last, a mother and her young son.

But the mother was distraught and wouldn't leave the area. Her two-week old baby boy was trapped under many tons of debris. The workers could neither see nor hear any sign of her infant son.

But until and unless she saw his lifeless body she was determined not to leave. So Kaled and his colleagues were determined not to quit rolling back all that rubble.

After several hours of hard digging, through heavy, broken concrete and stubborn tangles of rebar, they heard his weak cry. And that was when things got hard.

This little baby was just two weeks old, remember. Even a one pound piece of rubble could seriously injure or even kill him if it were to fall on him.

Worse still, he was in a very difficult spot to reach. Which was when the themes of the Lazarus story again began to play in my mind, as I watched this drama unfold.

But Lord, he's hard to reach.

I don't care. Unbind him and let him go.

But Lord, he's just two weeks old. We won't be able to reach him for many hours. Surely he's as good as dead already.

I don't care. Unbind him and let him go.

But Lord, we're exposed here. We are ourselves at risk. Another bomb could fall any minute.

Perhaps you're not listening. I said, unbind him and let him go.

And that is what they did. For the next 12 hours Kaled and his colleagues worked painstakingly through the night to remove the rubble in which this tiny infant boy was buried.

"These 12 hours were very difficult," Kaled confessed. Of course they were. Resurrection never comes easy.

"This is a life," he said. "One has to be delicate dealing with life." That's true. But not just delicate. Also, fearless and persistent and tireless.

But maybe not as delicate as Kaled first thought. He looks into the camera and asks: "Can you imagine how this two week old baby survived after his house was hit by a bomb and three stories collapsed above his head? This baby was stronger than barrel bombs, stronger than collapsed ceilings, stronger than everything."

It is surely true that this little guy was a fighter. A little Superman baby in his own tiny infant way.

But it's also true that without the willingness of Kaled and his colleagues to dig through that rubble for hours, to invest time and effort to unbind this tiny baby and let him go, even this little Superbaby would have died and the world would not have enjoyed the thrilling privilege of watching that moment when Kaled gently extracted him from his tight, dusty tomb, wearing his sweet little pajamas, crying for his mother, while another worker shielded his eyes from the heavy dust still falling all around him.

Or hear the cheers that went up when the boy was safely wrapped up in the arms of his rescuer.

Unbind him and let him go. I believe the story of Lazarus is true. I also believe this command goes out to all of us.

But maybe you're thinking, well, that's just ridiculous to locate the truth of an ancient Bible story in places like modern Syria and Iraq. And even more ridiculous since life here could hardly be more different, what with the absence of barrel bombs falling on our houses and all.

Yes, except that not all bombs are so literal. And sooner or later, chances are good that one is going to fall on you, or on someone you love.

I don't say this to make any of us afraid, just to name the way life is. You live long enough and eventually you'll get hit with a hard surprise that will knock the wind out of you or, worse, take out your foundations, and demolish the roof over your head, and leave you feeling like you are buried under several tons of rubble.

The hard news is that this is just the nature of life on earth, and no one is immune from it.

But take a look around you. The good news is that this sanctuary is filled with our own version of White Helmet volunteers. Only here we have a different name for them.

We call them Easter people--a contingent of faithful onlookers who will dig into the rubble and keep digging until they find you, and raise you up and unbind you and let. you. go.

Is the story of Lazarus true? Yes, I believe it is. And I can say that because I've seen it play out right before my eyes, again and again and again.