

Sermon for Sunday 22 March 2026 – The Fifth Sunday of Lent

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Ezekiel 37.1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8.6-11; John 11.1-45

Almighty God, may my words honour you and be helpful to we who hear them. Amen. Please be seated.

Good morning. Our New Testament passage opens with the picture of a small family unit consisting of Martha, her sister Mary, and Lazarus, their brother. They knew Jesus and Jesus knew them. Martha, you may recall, was the one who scolded Jesus for letting Mary listen to his teaching instead of helping with the domestic chores. Mary was the one who anointed Jesus's feet with expensive perfume and wiped them with her hair. Lazarus is referred to by the sisters Jesus as one loved by Jesus.

Given this familiarity, it's not surprising that when Lazarus becomes ill, his sisters send word asking Jesus to come quickly to heal him. However, instead of dropping everything, Jesus surprises everyone by staying where he is for two days. When eventually Jesus does arrive in Bethany, Lazarus is dead. So having set the scene, I want now to consider the theme of resurrection and life, and to do this by looking at some of the words spoken to and by Jesus.

The first words we look at are those spoken by Martha. And later echoed almost exactly by Mary. These are words of criticism, for they say to Jesus, 'Lord, if you'd been here, my brother would not have died.' We can imagine what's going through the sisters' minds, for I'm sure we've sometimes had the same thoughts towards God when we have had trouble. 'Lord, why aren't you dropping everything to help me? Lord, if you love me, you'd do something about this.'

Yet Jesus is not without compassion. We read that when Jesus arrives in Bethany, he weeps. He is moved not only by Lazarus's death, but by the sorrow and pain of those close to him. However, Jesus's ministry, while characterised by healing and compassion, is not driven by those objectives. His primary aim, as we see in the text, is to bring glory to his Father in heaven.

While I'd like to believe that God will drop everything to make my life easier, I find it truer to my life experience to say that rather than remove the crises, he walks through them with me. And this was the experience of the psalmist who could say, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Personally, I don't believe that Jesus came to earth to cure all our pains. There is simply too much suffering in the world for that to seem credible. I do, however, believe that this passage, which clearly foreshadows the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of life beyond the grave, also points us to a new life, with Christ, this side of the grave. This new resurrected life, this Christian life, is not without its complications, not without its hurts, its failures. It's a life that's subject to all the normal ups and downs of life. The difference? God walks it with us. Guiding us, equipping us, and sometimes supporting us.

Returning to our narrative, we read that Jesus came to the tomb. It was a cave and a stone was lying against it. Jesus says, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he's been dead four days.' Martha's reluctance to move the stone is understandable. She's concerned that Lazarus' body has already begun to decay.

Perhaps there's a lesson for the church here. Lives in need of renewal, or resurrection, if you will, are seldom to be found in sterile environments. If the Church is to shine light into dark places, if it is to offer hope instead of despair, if it wishes, like Jesus, to preach good news to the poor, heal the broken-hearted, proclaim freedom to prisoners, restore sight to the blind, set oppressed people free, that ministry will take us to some pretty messy places.

Removing the stone may introduce us to people who are not from our tribe, who may not talk like us, look like us, behave like us. Nevertheless, Jesus says to us today, as to the crowd around the tomb, take away the stone. For it is only when the stone has been removed that Lazarus will hear Jesus say, 'Lazarus, come out.'

And for many of us who try to follow Jesus's teachings, who call ourselves Christian, this call to come out of the tomb is still relevant. Perhaps you've been wounded by life and have taken shelter within yourself. 'Come out from the tomb', says Jesus. Perhaps you've become ensnared by old habits and feel alienated from God by your attitudes and actions. 'Come out of the tomb', says Jesus. Perhaps you're conscious of your own shortcomings and long to know the forgiveness of God. 'Come out from the tomb,' says Jesus.

Hear the kindly words of Jesus spoken to all. 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls; for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.' One way or another, at some time or another, Jesus says to us all, 'Come out from the tomb, follow me.'

And when Lazarus does emerge from the tomb, the Gospel tells us that his hands and feet were bound with strips of cloth, and his face was wrapped in a cloth. Jesus's next words are therefore to instruct those present to unbind him and let him go. Please note, Jesus does not ask Lazarus to free himself. He needs the help of others, and so do we. It is often the Church's task—that is, our task—to complete a person's resurrection. Jesus has called forth new life, but Lazarus is still encumbered by his burial clothes. He still needs others to unbind him and free him.

So, how might we help? Well, we can unbind people through forgiveness, letting them know we have put past hurts behind us. Or maybe we need to set them free by seeking their forgiveness. We can set people free by allowing them expression, not criticising their every effort, by understanding that growth will come as much by their mistakes as by their successes.

We can unbind people by gladly accepting their points of difference, whether that be disability, ethnicity, sexuality, marital status, whatever. We can set people free by acknowledging that although we may not be drawn to someone temperamentally, they have as much right to a place in God's Church as we do. We can set them free by encouraging, not undermining them.

Unbind him and let him go. These should be our marching orders every day of our life, whenever and wherever we find someone needing to be set free—our friend, wife, husband, companion, colleague, Jesus commands us, where we can, to unbind them and let them go. This is what we are called to do. When we refuse to forgive, when we choose to obstruct and frustrate, it is we who keep them bound. We do have that power.

Our passage concludes with the words 'Many of the Jews who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did believed in him'. If we really want those around us to believe, it is we who must show forth the new resurrection life of Christ. It is we who must emerge from our tombs. It is we who must freely and gladly unbind those around us. As we respond in this way, the ongoing work of Jesus will be revealed, and those around us will better understand that Jesus continues to be both the resurrection and the life. Amen.