

April 3, 2022 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [John 11:38–44](#)

TITLE: Removing Impediments

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

One important job I have as a pastor is to work with families in planning funeral services. People will call me and tell me there's been a death in their family, and very commonly they'll next say, "I'm not sure what happens now; I've never done this before." So along with comforting them in their loss, I will talk them through the general logistics associated with any funeral. We discuss whether they want a visitation or not, embalming or cremation, a cemetery burial or a scattering of the ashes. Even though all these details can be worked out in advance, I should also acknowledge that things don't always go as planned. Sometimes the funeral director is late in delivering the casket; sometimes the grave has been dug in the wrong spot in the cemetery. I recently did a brief memorial service at a cemetery. At the end, we put the urn of ashes into a columbarium and watched as the marble stone was put in place to seal the entrance, only to realize that they had misspelled the person's name on the stone. Now, in that moment, the family could have pretended not to notice or they could have made a big scene. But I quietly talked to the cemetery staff and they were able to switch two brass letters on the stone to fix the misspelling right then. It was less than ideal, but it was also a reminder that life is messy and imperfect, and if we patiently work together, we can often make things right.

The story of Lazarus is one of the most dramatic stories in the bible. Jesus receives word that his dear friend is dying, yet he waits a few days more before traveling to Bethany. Upon arriving he is met by Lazarus' weeping sisters, Mary and Martha, and told he has died. Jesus goes with them to the cemetery, where he weeps alongside the grieving company of family and friends. He offers powerful words of faith saying, *I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even though they die, will live and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.* Then he faced the tomb where his friend was buried and ordered those standing nearby to take away the stone.

As I mentioned earlier, sometimes at funerals there are unintentional moments of awkwardness. But this command from Jesus to roll away the stone was quite intentional and unprecedented. Martha tried to dissuade Jesus, noting that by this time there would be an unpleasant stench from the tomb. One humorous side note about this story: when early Christians were buried in catacombs, the nearby walls would be decorated with frescoes of different bible stories. When they wanted to identify their drawing as a depiction of the story of Lazarus, they would show several people standing by an open tomb holding their noses. Anyway, Martha tried to keep the grave stone in place. Whatever Jesus had in mind, she wasn't sure she would like it.

Gracia Grindal, a Lutheran seminary professor, has said, *Sometimes people fear resurrection more than they fear death. Finality has a certain comfort; at least we know what to do. [Resurrection] change will always be frightful to those who are intent on being their own Lord.*¹ Sometimes we fear resurrection. We stand right beside Martha

and object when Jesus comes into the dark places of our lives and points at that which we'd prefer be kept buried and announces, "Take away the stone."

We all have placed parts of our lives behind heavy stones—unresolved conflicts, lost friendships and broken relationships; memories of abuse or ill-treatment; secret addictions kept from others; repressed anger or painful rejections. There is a cold comfort in the finality that says such things are over and done with, dead and buried so they won't have to be seen in the light of day again. That's what we tell ourselves. But as we all know, those who die never fully leave us and that which we bury away is never truly gone.

The voice of Jesus, telling us to take away the stone, speaks to us individually and collectively. He speaks with a voice of comfort when referring to our personal pain—just as he speaks with a voice of prophetic courage when referring to things that are unjust and oppressive of others. He says "take away the stone" and strength is found for #metoo stories to break the silence of sexual abuse and misogyny. He says "take away the stone" and people take to the streets to proclaim that Black Lives Matter, that migration laws are unjust, that prejudice against indigenous people and Asian Americans must end at last. Jesus proclaimed "I am the resurrection and the life." That message is as much about the life that is as it is about the life to come. It is a call to remove impediments, to take away the stones, to strike down the laws, to flood the places of darkness with the light of faith, the light of compassion, the light of God's justice.

The command to "take away the stone" is not just pulpit rhetoric. It is a literal, concrete form of spiritual discipline. Mariame Kaba is an African American grassroots organizer and activist. She has said, *"Hope is a discipline and it's one that's hard to maintain. To keep hope for the future alive we have to consider it as still uncertain; we have to believe that concerted, collective human action might yet avert disaster."*² I would amend her quote to say that to keep hope alive, we have to believe that by God's grace and collective human action, disaster can be averted. By grace and action, justice is possible—change happens—stones are rolled away—resurrection is real now and hereafter.

Madeline Albright, the first woman Secretary of State, recently died. In an article about her, it was mentioned that she had traveled to the Czech Republic in 1995 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the liberation of that land from Nazi control in World War II. During a parade, many people waved American flags as she passed by. To her surprise some of the flags only had 48 stars. It turned out that American G.I.s had handed out flags a half century earlier and some of the families had kept them hidden away in their homes during all the years of Soviet domination. They had passed them down to their children as a discipline of hope, as a symbolic reminder of freedom and of a better future yet to come.³

When Jesus says "take away the stone," it is invariably a call to life. It is a call to step away from shadows and brokenness and buried secrets and structural injustice. It is

also a call to wave the flag of freedom, no matter how long delayed; to exhale the stench of death and breathe fresh air into our lungs; to move from tombs of all types to life in its fullest—as God intends for each of us and all of us.

And just in case we missed this message after Jesus had them remove the impediment of the stone, basically the same thing happened again once Lazarus stepped out of the tomb. There he was—resuscitated but still wrapped in burial cloths and the ribbons of death. At that moment, the verdict was still out on whether this was a good idea or not. No one went rushing forward. I imagine a very long pause in the dramatic action as everyone tried to wrap their heads around what they were seeing.

So what does Jesus do? He does what he always does. He turns to us. The resurrection call to life is never something that only comes from Christ. It is never just a voice from heaven. As Richard Rohr said in his book *Radical Grace*, “*Though Jesus brings us to life, he needs us...to unbind Lazarus. We share in the power of resurrection. That is the meaning of church, our call, our burden, our task in human history.*” After ordering the stone to be rolled away and calling the dead man from the darkness into the light, Jesus said, “*Unbind him and let him go.*” Unbind the cloths that make it hard to walk. Unwrap the cloth that is draped over the eyes and make it hard to see. Take off the chains; step away from the fears; reject the addictions, the hatred and doubts and punitive spirits; repeal the laws and ordinances that diminish the beloved community. Come out of your individual and collective tombs. Unbind one another as Christ’s disciples.

That’s the powerful message of this passage. In Christ Jesus, we are called to life—and we cannot do it alone. We are called to life, which involves a discipline of hope, of believing in something year after year. We are called to life, of hearing the call of Christ that cannot be ignored no matter how thick the stones are we’ve placed over our tombs. We are called to unbind others even as we allow others to unbind us. We are called to life and we cannot do it alone.

The movement from death to life happens every day. Jesus calls us to remove the impediments – stones, stench, bindings—that would keep us locked in our tombs. He then puts us to work unbinding others on his behalf, by his grace, always to the glory of God. Don’t fear resurrections. They’re at the heart of our faith—this day, now and always.

AMEN

¹ Gracia Grindal, “New Sight, New Life: Lenten Gospels,” *Word & World* 16/1, 1996.

² Manohla Dargis, “Dune” Review: A Hero in the Making, on Shifting Sands” *New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2021, p. 60.

³ Hillary Clinton, “Madeleine Albright Warned Us”, *New York Times*, March 27, 2022, p. SR3.