

Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 2, 2017
The Rev. Bob Becker

Lazarus and Me

It was the summer of 1945. The War was over. No more war games for us kids. We just weren't interested in playing war and killing one another with plastic guns. I think we were like the rest of the country. We were tired of war.

We were an adventuresome bunch of kids with nothing to do that summer. Until one of us came up with the idea of exploring the one place we always avoided. It was an empty stone building that was partially constructed on the edge of the cemetery. The two-story building was supposed to be a temporary mausoleum where bodies would be stored during the winter until spring when the ground had thawed.

I remember standing there looking up at the huge structure. We all wanted to know what was inside. But for some reason, I didn't want to go near that building, let alone climb up and take a look inside.

My fears were infectious. Somebody said, "Aw, there probably isn't anything in there to see. Just a big empty room." One by one, we turned around and walked the two miles back home.

The building remained empty and unfinished for years before it was finally demolished.

Now, this may take a leap of faith for some of us, myself included. But I think this story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the tomb is a lot like that empty mausoleum. In fact, I've come to think this miracle story is about emptiness.

The empty tomb from which Lazarus emerged that day.

The empty tomb that held the body of Jesus until the day of resurrection when he too broke the bonds of death and was loosed into the world.

I think about Martha and Mary. The emptiness they must have felt having lost their brother. And the emptiness of four days of waiting for Jesus to come.

What were those four days like for those two sisters? As each day passed and Lazarus slipped into death, it must have been unbearable – the waiting. Not knowing for sure that he would finally arrive with some measure of comfort and hope.

Martha, the head of the household. The caretaker. The one who was so attentive to the details of living. I think she too expected Jesus would do something to restore Lazarus back to health before it was too late. She thrived on orderliness but there was nothing orderly about death.

Even the serene and sorrow-filled Mary collapsed to her knees in grief when he finally arrived. "Lord, you're too late. If only you had arrived sooner..." She too was angry. Angry that her brother had been taken away from her. Angry at Jesus for not getting there to bring Lazarus back from the brink of death.

How like us, these two. We all endure the same reactions of grief and loss, the same emptiness in our souls when we experience the loss. Any loss. Loss of a loved one. Loss of a job. A home.

A relationship, loss of financial security and the loss of hope. Feelings so strong that we forget his loving presence with us in times of grief and unbearable loss.

Reminds us of that lovely little story of the man who complained to God. “You promised me, Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. “But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life, there has been only one set of footprints in the sand. “Why, when I needed you most, have you not been there for me?”

And the Lord replied, “The years when you have seen only one set of footprints, my child, is when I carried you.”

Recently, I spent hours with a bereavement group in Memphis all of whom had lost a loved one. They shared their stories with me to use in my thesis on the Spirituality of Bereavement. Tom is a member of the group and a dear friend. He and his wife Meredith had been our neighbors in an apartment complex in Alexandria back in the 70s.

Their daughter, Tracy, had been diagnosed with cancer at age eighteen months. Two and a half months later, Tracy died, leaving Tom and Meredith to begin a life-long journey of grief. Today, Tom is also grieving over the loss of his wife Meredith who died a year ago.

One night in the living room of his home, he told me about the grief of losing his wife of over 50 years. “Bob, I know she’s with God up in heaven,” he said. “But I don’t know who I am any more. I feel empty inside. I used to be a husband and a father. Now, I don’t know who I’m supposed to be. I know God is with me. But there’s got to be some meaning to losing my wife and our daughter.”

One thought seems to sustain Tom and all those people in that bereavement group. They’ve learned that just coming together helps them realize the power and the presence of God in their midst. Even when they slip back a little, they are pulled back from the edge of despair by the eternal living and loving presence of Christ.

Jesus said to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. I am here with you. Do you believe this Martha?” “Yes, Lord,” she replied. “I believe that you are the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

I’ve wondered what made her say that. But I have a theory. I think she said that because she sensed a power that flowed from Jesus as he spoke.

This last week of Lent we too sense that our time of waiting will soon be over. Already, we’re beginning to feel that same power flowing into our souls.

A power that has been loosed into the entire world to set us all free from the empty tombs of our lives.