

A Community that Unbinds the Bound

John 11:1-45 Ezekiel 37:1-14
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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One of the hallmarks of what is becoming known as "Progressive Christianity" is that it is providing new and alternative understandings to ancient church doctrines, engraved-in-granite orthodoxy, and perhaps most importantly, biblical interpretation. As you are aware, there's a new organization in town that has been formed in hopes of addressing such issues on a scale broader than just individual congregations, or individuals in congregations that aren't progressive. It's called the **Progressive Religious Coalition of Tulsa**. Our Inaugural Event is this very afternoon.

Through a video presentation, a panel and group discussion, we will be dealing with a timely topic as we approach Holy Week, *Was Jesus Sacrificed?* Having to believe that God *required* the blood of a sacrifice, in this case the execution of his own son, *in order* to be able to forgive a sinful and disobedient human race has been a major stumbling block for many. This issue alone has led many people either away from organized religion, or worse, caused people to not participate in a community of faith in the first place.

This morning, however, I'm going to deal more with the issue of biblical interpretation, rather than church doctrine and orthodoxy. **Orthodoxy, by the way, literally mean "right belief." The assumption, of course, is that if there is "right" belief then there must also be "wrong" belief, which historically has been called heresy.** So whether you want to label much of what is taught and believed here at College Hill as unorthodox or down right heretical, I prefer the term, progressive.

I like the way *Jesus Seminar* scholar Marcus Borg deals with the issue of biblical interpretation from a progressive perspective in his 2002 book entitled, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally*. Case in point, today's Gospel reading from John 11 involves Jesus bringing his friend Lazarus back from the dead.

Many modern folks rightly have trouble taking this story literally, perhaps as much or more so than any other reported miracle in the Bible. Saying that, allowing people the right to interpret this story from a literal historical standpoint is important for those of us who call ourselves inclusive. But requiring people to do so, and **telling them that they just "don't believe the Bible" if they don't adhere to a literal interpretation is not the approach of progressives.**

Our approach, instead, says **literalness isn't really the important issue anyway, but rather: What is the meaning that the author hoped these stories would point?**

In other words, if you want to believe that the historical person named Jesus of Nazareth literally brought a corpse back to life, you have that right. But you also have the right to believe that this story was meant by the author to simply be metaphorically symbolic of a deeper reality. Buy the way, if you believe both, or lie somewhere in-between, or just don't know, that's valid as well.

That's kind of a long introduction that I hope serves the purpose of saying that **the important thing isn't to get stuck by the implausible literalness of this story and**

therefore disregard it altogether. For like Borg, my approach is to indeed take this and all other biblical stories very seriously and see what they might reveal about:

- the nature and character of God,
- the nature and character of humanity,
- our relationship with the Divine, and
- our relationship with each other.

Admittedly, this very long story about the raising of Lazarus has numerous important issues that deserve a great deal of study and reflection. I'd like to primarily address just one small element of this story, a detail that is most often overlooked completely in the process of getting caught up in all the miraculous goings on, like resurrection, or more correctly, resuscitation.

First, however, I want to take a brief detour and talk about the significance of art. **If you were going paint a picture depicting this story, what scene would you paint?** How would you paint it? What characters would be present? What would they be doing?

In preparing this sermon I got on the Internet and looked at over three-dozen paintings of how this particular biblical story from John 11 has been portrayed throughout the ages. The vast majority of those paintings, including the one by Rembrandt, have two major points of focus: Jesus, usually looming above a crowd, with his arm dramatically outstretched and raised, performing the miracle; and Lazarus, arising from a tomb, wrapped up like a mummy, and usually standing alone. Most of the paintings also included other background characters of folks looking stunned and amazed, even frightened. Most of them were focused on Jesus.

Then I came across one painting in particular, which more than any of the others, portrayed this often overlooked command of Jesus at the end of the story when he tells the gathered community to, **"Take away the stone"** from the tomb, and then, **"Unbind him, and let him go."**

This is the painting that is on the cover of this morning's worship bulletin, painted in the 1320s, almost 700 years ago, by Giotto. It's a fresco painted on a wall in the Magdalene Chapel in the Lower Church at the Monastery of St. Francis of Assisi in central Italy.

Yes, Jesus is there with outstretched arm, but not nearly as dramatically as in other portrayals. And Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters, aren't looking at him, but rather are kneeling at Jesus' feet, a sign of worship. But **the dramatic emphasis is focused on Lazarus. And the community isn't just standing there in shock and amazement, they are following Jesus' instructions by helping unbind Lazarus from the wrappings that have him bound.** There are even two boys in the painting who have helped by removing the stone cover away from the tomb.

So why do I find this particular element of the story so important? Primarily, because it serves as a directive to our own ministry as a community of faith. It's important to note that it isn't Jesus who removes the stone and does the unbinding, but the community that's present when Lazarus comes out.

Yes, the story reveals that it is Jesus, through the power of God, that makes new life possible. But it is the action of Lazarus' family and friends that frees him from what keeps him bound so tight.

Jesus did his part, then commands us to do our part. And our part is to remove that which binds our brothers and sisters, helping release them from that which entombs

them. We have been given a crucial and active role in helping to bring about the wholeness and freedom and new life of others.

The person who is bound, whether it be by sin, or alienation, or prejudice, or oppression, or addiction, or poverty, or loneliness, is unable, according to this story, to unbind him- or herself without help from others. That's where we come in. While it is God who makes new life possible, our role is to be among those who approach those persons and do what we can in the process of unbinding and setting free. A day doesn't go by when we don't encounter someone who is bound. The question is, What are we doing to help – individually or as a congregation?

So **how can we help?** Here's an idea. I know I've referred to this on numerous occasions, but I think that our own **Mission Statement**, which we print each week on the announcement page of our bulletin, gives us some dynamic guidelines. It starts by declaring, "The Mission of College Hill Presbyterian Church is to: **Build an inclusive community of faith.**"

Whenever we are able to reach out with an open and welcoming hand to others, providing a place of sanctuary and hope, we are involved in the process of unbinding. And who among us hasn't found that the newness of a progressive religious perspective plays a crucial role in unbinding us from the clutches of orthodoxy.

The second point of our Mission Statement is to: "**Receive and openly share the love of God.**" Way too many people live their lives wrongly believing that they have done things for which God can not forgive them. Others carry the unnecessary burden of thinking that God doesn't accept them for who they are. You may be among these people. I have at points in my life.

Let me be as clear as possible. **I, and perhaps most or all of you as well, do not believe in a God who hates, punishes or rejects.** We believe in a God who loves unconditionally, who draws near to us, and who wants us to understand that we are called to share that love with others.

The third and final point in our Mission Statement declares that we "**Reach out with a compassionate voice for peace and justice.**" Each and every time we work to improve the well-being of others and strive for equal rights for all persons we are working to unbind those who are bound by injustice.

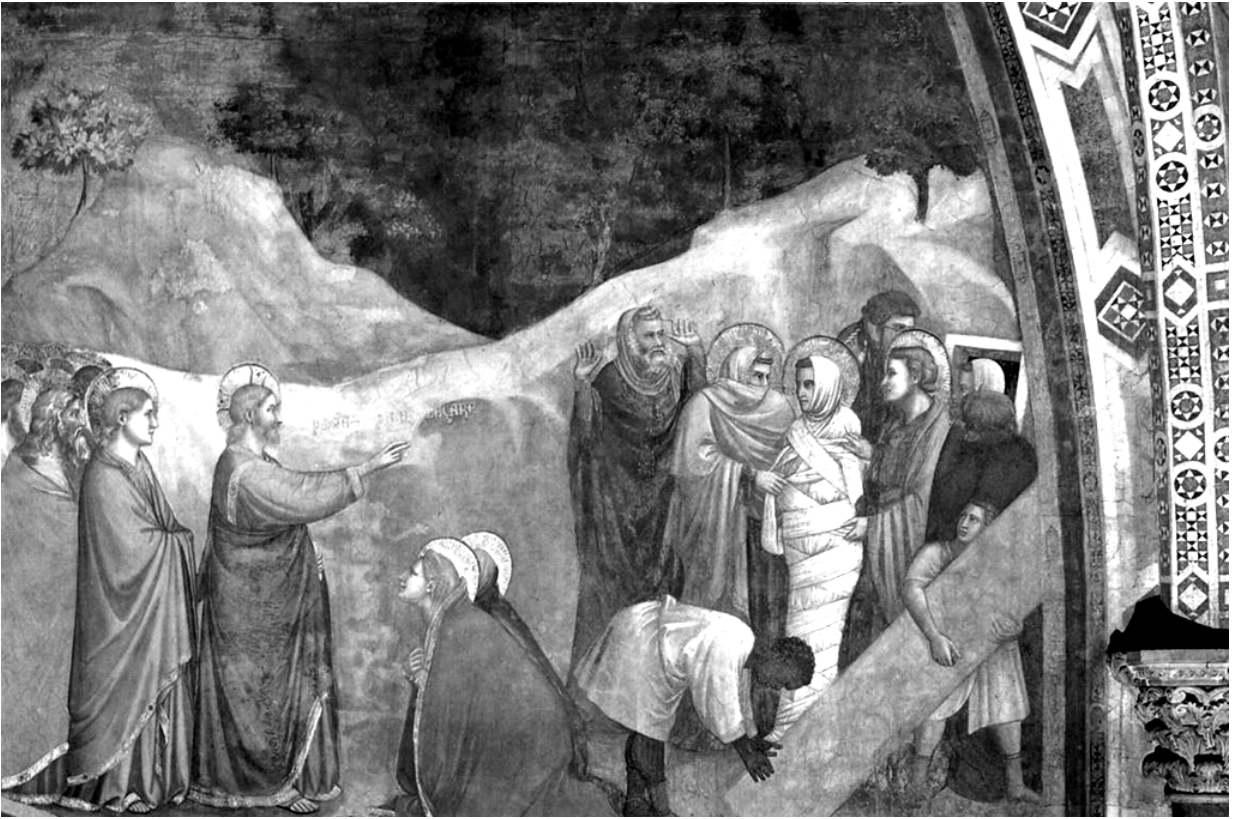
Ultimately, this story of Lazarus is a story about **liberation.** Perhaps you know someone who needs help coming out from that which entombs them. Perhaps you could be the person who helps in the unbinding and liberating process.

Or, **perhaps you are the one who is entombed and bound, in need of liberation.** Psychological issues, socialization issues, political issues, spiritual issues, whatever, can make us feel like we're the ones living in the cave of non-being, the tomb of living death, or in that valley of dry bones. If so, know that **Jesus calls you and me, like he did Lazarus, to come out of that tomb.**

So whether you're the one who's bound, or the one doing the unbinding, this story of coming out and finding liberation should bring each of us much hope. And may we be known as a community of faith who actively responds in this ministry of liberating and unbinding those who are bound.

For if I were to paint this story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, each of our faces would appear in the crowd, standing ready to respond when Jesus commands us to, "Take away the stone," and "Unbind them, and let them go."

Amen.



The Raising of Lazarus

1320s • by Giotto • Fresco in Magdalene Chapel, Lower Church, St. Francis of Assisi