

Roll Aside the Stone, Pastor Judy Peterson, First Covenant Church of Minneapolis, June 24, 2018

How many of you have ever seen a mummy? I remember the first time I saw one, it was here in the Twin Cities and I was probably in 3rd grade and I was on a field trip to the Science Museum. Down in one of the lower levels, there was a mummy in a glass case and I distinctly remember two things about this once living, now dead human being. 1. He was tiny and I remember thinking I would have been a giant in Egypt. 2. He was wrapped so tightly with grave clothes wound around him over and over again until his little body was confined for all eternity. I remember thinking that perhaps I could have dealt with being a giant, but that being wound so tightly for so long was just not for me.

I remember the bodily impulse I had that day as I stood next to that once living, now dead human being. And I feel that impulse again today; I just wanted to wildly swing my arms around. Something from deep inside me, both then and now, seems to cry out the truth that the freedom to stretch out into the fullness of your embodied self is just so much better than being held captive. And yet captivity and being wound up tight is where so many people live, if that's what you can call really living.

And some of you here today, resonate with this image because this morning you are all wrapped up in grave clothes, the things of this life are wound around you over and over again until there is no room left for you to stretch out into the fullness of whom God would have you be. You are bound so tightly with things that have absolutely nothing to do with abundant life; things like fear, shame, doubt, anger and other people's expectations about who you should or should not be. So tight are those grave clothes, some times you find you can barely breathe. Let's be honest with one another that it's nowhere near the arm swinging freedom that Jesus offers.

This morning I want to declare that that bound up place is simply not what Jesus wants for any of us. Jesus has declared that he wants us to have life and life abundantly. Perhaps this very day, some of you will hear him call you by name to "come out" of any place that smells of death and to experience what it feels like to have your full self walk out of the grave. And so this morning, my prayer is that perhaps somehow, through the foolishness of preaching, I might join Jesus in unwinding some of the fear, some of the shame, some of the doubt, some of the lies, some of the anger and whatever else has left you bound and living anything less than free.

PRAYER

Let me set the scene for our scripture passage this morning. John 11 begins, *Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.* ² *(This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.)*³ *So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."*

"Lord, the one *you love* is sick." This feels like a good place to begin with some of the unbinding, because it is easy for any of us to get all wrapped up in thinking that the difficult things that have happened in the past or that are happening to us in the present transpire because God doesn't love us. For most of us when we are in the midst of things that feel like death and dying it is easy to wonder if Jesus still loves us. But this text proclaims that someone who is sick and who ultimately dies, is in fact, the beloved of God. "Lord, the *one you love* is sick" And I want your heart to hear this truth this morning, because keeping this pointed truth close to you increases the likelihood that you just may catch a bit of your grave clothes on it, so that ultimately everything else can be unwound.

Lazarus is loved by God *and* Lazarus is dying. Lazarus is dying *and* Lazarus is loved by God. You see, if we can hold on to the fact that these two things are both true, this will keep us from getting wrapped up in the lie, that difficult things happen because God doesn't love us. Now I don't know why difficult things happen I'm just saying it's not because God doesn't love us. The proportion of the origin of any event is a mystery to me. The Bible offers several options, you sinned, someone else sinned against you, the world is fallen, the devil is prowling around like a lion, or God's hands were in it. But the breakdown in percentages is above my pay grade, 7% you, 15%them, 20%the devil, I don't claim to know.

All I am proclaiming is that difficulties in your life do not mean that you are not loved. "Lord, the *one you love* is sick", which means you can be sick and beloved at the same time, upending the long held belief that pain is punishment for sin and difficulties a witness to the fact that God has withdrawn his affection from you. Jesus actually spends much of his life undoing religious formulas, this one in particular seems to live at the root of many of the others and Jesus circles back to it over and over again. The formula can be summed up in this way, obedient people suffer less and if you are suffering it is because you were disobedient or as my Old Testament professor used to say, "obey and live – disobey and die".

The culture in which Lazarus lived, was tightly wrapped up in this "truth" and most everyone believed that the difficult circumstances one found oneself in were caused because God was rejecting you or punishing you for your sin. But our passage says, you can be in a place of suffering or death even when you are the beloved of Jesus. "Lord, the *one you love* is sick",

Interestingly enough there is another time Jesus engages with a man named Lazarus and this same formula is confronted. A rich man who had everything in life and a poor man covered in sores both die. The poor man is carried by the angels to the heavenly banquet and the rich man ends up in torment. Clearly Jesus is declaring that blessing and power and ease in this life are not equivalent with God's blessing and power and conversely poverty and sickness and struggle are not an accurate barometer of God's affection.

This is just one of the many long held religious formulas that Jesus upends, formulas that were/are believed by the majority of those who would consider themselves religious. But this formula is actually one of the more dangerous because those who were in places of privilege often assumed that they were in those places of privilege because God was siding with them. And I would say this still rings true today, that those who *are* in places of privilege often assume that we *are* in those places of privilege because God is siding with us and that those who are marginalized or suffering are marginalized and suffering because God doesn't favor them or because they have sinned.

Perhaps this seems so obviously untrue to you, but I am child of the 80s'and I still remember religious people saying with great conviction, that HIV/AIDS was God's punishment upon gay people. That gay people were receiving "due punishment in their flesh" for their sin and this sickness was God's proclamation that they were not loved by God. HIV/AIDS was declared evidence of whom God sided with or against. And it is well documented that the slow response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic was in part because HIV/AIDS was perceived as a disease of the sinful and as a society, specifically one that considers itself religious, we picked our prejudices and our "clear" interpretation at the expense of human lives.

It is unfathomable the damage done and the lives lost because Christians were so confident that their interpretation of Romans 1:27 was true and that the sick were not God's beloved. Oh church our interpretations can have dire consequences for real lives. We must hold them humbly for real people are on the other end of them. Oh church you better be sure.

Obey and live, disobey and die. This ancient formula is not as ancient as we think. People in places of

privilege continue to assume that we are in those places of privilege because God is siding with us. And we continue to proselytize the “truth” that those who are marginalized or suffering are marginalized and suffering because God doesn’t favor them or because they have sinned.

This is part of what makes Jesus so interesting, because Jesus, whom we as Christians believe to be God in the flesh, is always hanging out with and siding with the suffering. As Richard Rohr states so plainly in *Jesus* we can clearly see that, “God has a bias toward the bottom”. It is so important for both the privileged and the marginalized to unbind ourselves from a formula that says anything different. If we don’t get free from this captivity the privileged will continue to believe they are privilege by divine preference and the marginalized will continue to wonder if they are the beloved of God and both of these falsehoods are a tragedy.

“Lord, the one you love is sick.”⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.”

Now this is no small thing to believe, that God may be glorified through tragedy. And the truth is, it’s rarely good pastoral advice. When someone is really hurting, just think before you say, “this is part of God’s plan”. You better be pretty sure before you go saying that to someone else in the midst of their death and dying. That being said, “I’ve been truly amazed in my life how much God can be glorified in and through the messy and painful things we travel through.

For me knowing that God *can be* glorified in my struggle, well it’s been helpful in this past painful season of my life and I happen to believe it’s one of the most miraculous things that God does. And I have personally experienced God’s miraculous work when God has taken things that have seemed unredeemable and when I have place them into God’s hands...well you might be surprised at how God might be glorified in them.

Many of you know my husband and I do not have living children. There really is nothing good to say about 11 pregnancy losses. But Jeff and I did work hard place the whole of the hard into God’s hands and I do believe the losses of our own children is one of the reasons I became so keenly aware of how the church tosses aside their own LGBTQ children. As someone who so wanted a child, it was easy for my heart to say, “If you don’t want them, I’ll take them.” And I believe God has been glorified in this. Now, I don’t believe it was part of God’s plan that my husband and I lost 11 children. And I certainly don’t believe it is part of God’s plan that the church abandons their LGBTQ children, this certainly cannot be the plan of God. However, my own life testifies to the fact that God can be glorified in and through anything, even this. So if your in the thick of what seems unredeemable to you right now I would invite you to consider the possibility, that if you can get whatever that “unredeemable” thing is, into God’s hands, well you just never now.

These two things, being confident that I remain the beloved of God even when things are painful and knowing that God can redeem things even things he didn’t cause, these two things have helped me to hold onto the hope of better ending and have helped to unbind me from the hopelessness and grief that once

bound me so tightly. And these two things, that bad things are not the barometer of whether or not people are beloved and that God just might do something we hadn't dreamed of, these truths lay the foundation for our story of Lazarus, who dies because of his sickness and who is then wrapped in grave cloths and placed in a tomb. Lazarus was loved by Jesus and with God involved, things that seem final may just have an encore.

Our passage this morning details a bit of this encore. Jesus arrives at his friend's grave four days after his death.

³⁸ Jesus was still upset as he arrived at the tomb, a cave with a stone rolled across its entrance. ³⁹ "Roll the stone aside," Jesus told them.

But Martha, the dead man's sister, protested, "Lord, he has been dead for four days. The smell will be terrible."

⁴⁰ Jesus responded, "Didn't I tell you that you would see God's glory if you believe?"

⁴¹ So they rolled the stone aside. Then Jesus looked up to heaven and said, "Father, thank you for hearing me. ⁴² You always hear me, but I said it out loud for the sake of all these people standing here, so that they will believe you sent me."

⁴³ Then Jesus shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound in graveclothes, his face wrapped in a headcloth. Jesus told them, "Unwrap him and let him go!"

I want us to be clear as we step into this life after death story that the encore isn't a passive endeavor. The redeeming work of God is fully participatory and we know this because Jesus could have, but didn't, use his mind tricks to move the stone aside. Standing in front of the cave where Lazarus' body had been laid with a stone placed across the entrance, Jesus says to those standing with him. "Roll the stone aside." And before I move on I want to state plainly the fact that those who traveled most closely with Jesus often found themselves standing in close proximity to tragedy. I would tell you that this remains true today. If you are staying in step with Jesus, you will often find yourself standing in front of painful things that seem without a solution.

And the best advice I can give you is that when you find yourself standing there, in front of a painful scene seemingly lacking a solution, make sure you listen for instructions. Jesus says to those standing in front of the tomb. "Roll the stone aside" and at least some who were gathered were listening and they began to roll the stone aside. I also imagine that some stood around and watched while others did the heavy lifting which is often the case in life and in the church.

I believe today that Jesus is looking for some stonerollers, some people who are willing to do some heavy lifting. We need a few less onlookers and a few more people who are willing to put their backs into the fight against injustice. Racism isn't going to move easily. Misogyny is really heavy. Poverty and Bigotry are substantial. And if we want them to roll aside we can't be bystanders or simply believers that it would be better if they were gone.

We simply can't wish these weighty things away, we need to get our backs into it and become stonerollers for there is some practical work for us to do. And while we cannot do what only Jesus can do

he will not do what he's already asked us to do. We are the ones that are invited to clear the way for the redemptive work of Jesus and I want to offer an image that has encouraged me in this work.

Not long ago I was praying for God's work in the world. While I was praying a vision came to me, filled with migrations, so many migrations, or birds and turtles, caribou and whales. As I sat in the middle of that vision the Holy Spirit brought to mind a show I had watched called *Engineering Marvels* about the building of the Alaskan pipeline. I learned that because of the permafrost much of the pipeline is built above ground. When the above ground design was revealed environmentalists had a fit because the pipeline was going to block the caribou migration. This ignited these environmentalists who started to do the heavy lifting of lobbying, protesting, and seeking to change the guidelines that governed the building of the pipeline. As a result in 554 places the pipeline was built eight feet above ground. The tireless work these environmentalists helped remove the barriers that were blocking the migration to life and life abundantly.

There are things that are blocking people's movement towards abundant life. Simply said, there are pipelines in people's way and I believe we must put our lives into the work of removing these barriers. We are the one's that must hear Jesus' command to "Roll the stone aside" so that God can call forth whole and abundant life. If there is injustice we must lift whatever stands in the way of justice. If there is racism we must raise the barriers to reconciliation. If there is violence we must raise peace. If there is broken leadership blocking the way, we must let ourselves be held accountable and if you've been hurt by broken leadership one of the ways we move into a better life is by refusing to disown the movement simply because it's leaders block the way. The way we lift the barrier is when there is incomplete teaching or no teaching at all we offer in good teaching and fresh teaching. Where there is legalism we offer grace, where there is hypocrisy we are consistent or honest about our inconsistencies. Where there are lies, tell the truth. Where there is exclusivity, offer an invitation. Where there is hopelessness, always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that you have.

There is so much blocking the way to abundant life that Jesus needs all of us to be listening because you may be the particular person standing in front of a particular place of death when Jesus says, "Roll the stone aside." I know this happened to me, because I found myself standing in front of a particular stone blocking particular lives from experiencing abundant life and I am so glad was listening.

For years I have been standing with Jesus as we watched something die in LGBTQ people when the church told them that their desire to be in an intimate relationship with another is sinful. I have seen life leak out of both my friends and those under my pastoral care when their family or their church tells them they must bury their humanity if they want to avoid rejection. Oh, they are welcome to come to church, if they are willing to bury part of themselves outside the front door. And I have watched my friends wind themselves over and over again in yards of shame when they cannot get rid of their desires.

Marcus and Roel, the brothers in Christ whose wedding I officiated personally knew this slow death, this burial and what it felt like to be tightly bound by shame. Marcus and Roel also knew Jesus and also by faith believed that there was a life for them outside the darkness of the cave. And so when I stood with Jesus in front of the cave where the church had bound them placed them, I was listening for how I might participate with Christ in bringing forth life.

When Marcus and Roel invited me to officiate their wedding, Jesus invited me to something else at the same time. Jesus invited me to do some heavy lifting, to put my back into rolling the stone aside, the stone that has kept our LGBTQ brothers and sisters from the full life that that God has for them. And let me be clear on this, because there seems to be a bit of confusion about this, I am not saying that this stone is yours to roll as well. What I am saying is that if you have not heard Jesus say, "roll the stone aside" and if you are not involved in any heavy lifting on behalf of those who do not have access to life abundantly,

then you are either not standing close enough to Jesus to hear him or you are not listening to his invitation to get rolling.

41 So they rolled the stone aside.

43 Then Jesus shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" 44 And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound in graveclothes, his face wrapped in a headcloth.

"Lazarus Come Out" I can't help but love this verse when it's PRIDE weekend here in Minneapolis.

Two things I want to note this morning about this phase of the encore. First I want to make clear that while I've rolled away stones, I've never raised a person back to life. There is only so much we can do. This is why we need to establish an intimate connection to Jesus Christ, because Jesus needs to be present when we find the limits of what we can do.

We can roll away the stone, but only Jesus can bring forth life.

I want to say this, mostly to my young people because you are such great stonerollers, but you need to know what you cannot do on your own. You are excellent organizers and strategizers and your hearts are huge, but this is not just about our abilities and our passions, but also about God's power. And for that we will all need to stay in close proximity to Jesus otherwise we will just end up exhausted with all the stone rolling and we will still be surrounded by the smell of death.

The second thing I want to note is that Jesus did not call forth just Lazarus' leg without resurrecting the rest of his body. Nor did Jesus call forth just his torso without his limbs or his body without his personality. Jesus called forth the whole of Lazarus because when Jesus is doing his redeeming work he calls forth the whole of us. Jesus doesn't leave part of us in the grave and call only part of us back to life. Some of you have settled for being partially alive. Your work and ministry is full of life, but perhaps your relationships are on life support. Maybe your devotional life is strong, but your service life never sees the light of day. Perhaps your public life looks great, but your private life has the smell of death. Jesus did not call forth part of a person, but the whole of Lazarus. If there is part of your life still living in the tomb, go back and get it. Jesus wants life for the whole of you not just a piece of you.

I am confident about the necessity of this truth because when Jesus calls out Lazarus, he restores him to a community and it is difficult if not impossible to embrace just a part of a person and call it the beloved community. We can't embrace the grieving if we don't want to know whom or what they have lost. We can't embrace African American people, if we don't embrace the pain they've experienced at the hands of the majority culture. We can't embrace people of other cultures and languages if we want them to bury their culture and language outside the church's front door.

This is why it is so deeply concerning to me when the church communicates to LGBTQ people that it's safe to come out, but then wants our brothers and sisters to leave part of their real life in the tomb. Jesus Christ is not interested in raising back to life dismembered bodies. When the church tells LGBTQ persons we want you to come out, but leave your longings for love, your love for another and your hope to create a loving family back in the tomb, we are dismembering them. And this is not the pattern of the Jesus I know, the Jesus who consistently puts people's whole lives back together.

To all my brothers and sisters who identify as LGBTQ I am so sorry that the church has told you that you could leave behind a part of your identity because I know what that has done to you, it has left so many you with a sense of shame that you have been unable to live the dismembered life that was asked of you. I

am sorry for that. And I want you to hear that Jesus calls forth your whole self.

And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound in graveclothes, his face wrapped in a headcloth. Jesus told them, "Unwrap him and let him go!"

Our scriptures declare "It is for freedom that Jesus has set us free." (Gal 5:1) Arm swinging freedom where graveclothes and all that has bound us is left in the dirt outside the door of the tomb. Do not let yourselves be bound again, by anyone. Besides once dead, now alive people continuing to walk around bound up like mummies, simply look crazy.

And so those of you in the grave this morning, know that you are beloved even in the grace and but that if you will place the whole of you into the hands of God there might just be glorious next in place of what you felt was a dead end. People of God, here the words of Jesus this morning, "Come out of the Tomb," get up now and quit lying in that dead place. The stone has been rolled away. God has made a way where there seemed to be no way. Can you see the light shining into your tomb? Now you've got to get moving out of that dead place, remember this is participatory work and while Jesus makes it possible for you to walk out of the tomb, he won't *make you* walk out of the tomb. So when God calls your name you just put your feet on the floor and get up and follow Jesus' voice out of that dead place and into abundant life. "Come out of the Tomb"

And when you find yourself back in the land of the living, listen to what Jesus says to you for it will be similar to what he said to Lazarus, "Now take off the grave clothes and be free". Be done with the dead life that had you wound up so tight, confined and captive. Come and be done with the stench of death. Come and let your arms swing free. And may the whole of you bear witness to the God who brings whole life after death.

Benediction

May the God who loved the whole world so much he simply couldn't stay away and so he put on skin to come and walk with us,

Go before you to guide the way into a life of arm swinging freedom

Go behind you to encourage you that no matter how bad it gets you remain beloved

Be above you to watch over you, may you be confident that if you place the whole of your life in God's hands, there is a good shot at an encore where you have previously only seen an end of the road.

Go beside you as your most intimate traveling companion, may you walk close enough to Jesus, to hear him say, "Roll aside the stone", "Come out", and "Remove the grave clothes"

And may Jesus go within you to give you the peace that passes all understanding, the peace that makes no sense at all, the peace that comes when we know that Jesus raises our whole life.