

March 29, 2020

Pastor Lori Grasty

Baggage 4: Rise Up

Scripture: John 11:14-44 New Living Translation (NLT)

#1 Location Sanctuary

So, I'm not sure if you've noticed but there is a general trend in when I'm preaching and the message content I speak to.

When it was the Uncluttered series - I spoke to 'family concerns',

When we spent 6 months diving into the gospel of Matthew - I spoke on 'let the children come to me',

I stepped in on our family first aid series, and a few other times I spoke on service which is a big part of family ministry.

So you may be wondering why the theme for this week is "Rise-Up", we have a body bag here on the stage as part of the Baggage series, and I'm speaking

Well you and me both!

Lazarus is dead

Now this story feels harsh. Lazarus is dead.

Jesus just says it. And who *is* Lazaus? Lazarus is a friend, Lazarus is the brother of Martha & Mary. Mary is the one that washes Jesus' feet with oil, that sits and listens in his company, Martha busies herself. Jesus loves Martha & Mary - Jesus loves Lazarus. And Lazarus is dead.

Except ...

Jesus has already told them in the story 2 or 3 times before we get this point that Lazarus's death is not the end, that it's not permanent. The story begins with Jesus saying:

This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.

So, yes, Lazarus is dead now.

And Mary and Martha are upset.

They had called for Jesus. He was down near the Jordan River where John had been baptizing. He was close enough to get to Bethany. Really close if your dear friend is dying!

But Jesus, doesn't seem overly concerned. He sees a far bigger perspective than everyone else who is in a panic that Jesus hasn't arrived. Then suddenly, all too suddenly it is too late.

Lazarus is dead.

All human hope is now unnecessary. It is too late.

Have you ever been there? I have. Too late to fix it, it's too late to call out, too late even to hope. It's just too late.

Not only is it too late for Lazarus but Jesus said he'd help and he didn't. They are heartbroken. They are disappointed. Maybe they are feeling betrayed, or alone in their sorrow.

Jesus knows that Lazarus is dead. He tells his disciples this brutal truth. Only then does he decide to go to nearby Bethany. He arrives on the **fourth** day. The day that is beyond all hope. Throughout Scripture the **third** day is the day that God acts or has acted by - Jesus is resurrected on the 3rd day.

Jesus arrives on the hopeless day, the fourth.

Many Jews believed that the soul remained near the body for three days after death in the hope of returning to it. If this idea was in the minds of these people, they obviously thought all hope was gone—Lazarus was irrevocably dead.

So Jesus shows up and says 'Lazarus is dead'. Not especially reassuring or helpful.

That is the *truth* of the situation. It stings, it's painful.

Jesus had told them that he would be with them and this would not be the end of Lazarus's story nor theirs.

There is death, there is loss, there is trauma. There is heartache. And we turn to Jesus.

We pray in the good times so we know how to pray in the bad ... This is our spiritual practice that equips us for the journey - this is what we put in our travel bag.

It's not *if* there are bad times, it is *when* there are bad times.

So Jesus says "Lazarus is dead." That probably isn't very comforting.

Yeah, they know he is. And it's "too late".

But it's the truth, it's a statement of fact. It's the reality of the situation. It's on the same lines as :

- Life is hard.
- This isn't fair
- I'm struggling now.

- I'm not sure that I can.
- I feel alone.
- I'm lost
- It was my fault. I'm sorry ...

These are all realities. And sometimes admitting the reality of a situation is a step in healing. It probably doesn't soften the blow for Martha & Mary. And if I was in their situation, I'd probably be frustrated and upset and not a fan of hearing Jesus say that. I'd want more ... not a statement of a fact that I already know and have been grieving.

Just because we know there will be tragedy, doesn't mean that we don't grieve it when it happens.

But Jesus is there with them, and they aren't alone.

#2 Location: Gym (canned lighting only)

So we may feel sad ...

And here's the thing ... Jesus was sad too.

This chapter brings us one the most popular verses that is shared, the shortest verse in the Bible (the easiest verse to memorize).

John 11:35 - Jesus wept. *Why* would Jesus weep?

Because Jesus loved Lazarus and because Jesus loved Martha and Mary. And because Jesus loves us. And Jesus knows our hearts.

And he's with us wherever we go - in our times of joy and our times our sorrow.

Jesus is with us In our times of worship in the "Big Church" in the Sanctuary.

In our times of worship at Kidz Church in the Gym. When we share Jesus with hundreds of people in this space on Upward Saturdays.

When we close our building and take all of our connections online.

We are still the church. And we are not alone. God knows.

God knows there is tragedy in the world. God knows there is heartache. God was with us when the tragedy of 9/11 happened, the World Trade Center attacks. ... When there is war, and there are viruses and we wonder in these situations - how is God *good*? This doesn't feel good at all.

Jesus knows Lazarus is sick. Jesus knows that Lazarus died. And Jesus wept.

And we would wonder if God *is* good in the midst of tragedy IF this was the end of the story.

But it's not ...

Theologian Reuel Howe tells a story about when he was 15 years old. The family home caught on fire, and they escaped with only the clothes on their backs. Where they lived, out in the country, there were no close neighbors to help, so he and his father walked to a distant village to get supplies. As they returned, Howe saw something that stayed with him for many years.

Beside the charred remains of what had been their home, his mother had laid out lunch on a log. And on that log she had placed a tin can filled with wildflowers. **It was a symbol of hope following tragedy.**

This is what Christian life is all about ... Howe's mother didn't try to cover up the disaster with flowers, but in the midst of that gloomy scene (tragedy) she placed a symbol of hope.

Martha had the kind of hope that did not cover up the fact that her brother had died, but even in her grief, she held onto hope that Jesus would act.

Hope does not cover up what has occurred, but it gives a promise of something better to come. Hope doesn't get rid of the fact that our loved one is no longer with us, but it gives us the beauty of knowing there is more than just this life.

#3 Location : Zoom

Scripture : Romans 5:1-11 New Living Translation (NLT) - ready by Emily Kauffman

#4 Zoom (Me)

So God knows. And God is good. Because this is not the end. It may feel like it now.

In the midst of this time of going to 4 different stores to track down toilet paper.

In the midst of this time of anxiousness and risk and isolation we know this is not the end.

And we are not alone.

#5 Location: Rice Cemetery

We tend to think of the world as black OR white.

The things are good or bad.

Dark or light

Heaven or hell

Death or life

It is easier to think what way but Jesus tells us things are *not* black OR white. There is nothing that separates us from God. We have a God that's willing to go through death to find us.

We learn from Jesus and we learn from Lazarus that death is not the end.

Day 4 after death isn't even the end.

God has the power to overcome death and is willing to do this for us.

The Service of Death and Resurrection in our United Methodist Book of Worship includes these words in the opening prayer: "Give to us now your grace, that as we shrink before the mystery of death, we may see the light of eternity. ... Help us to live as those who are prepared to die. And when our days here are accomplished, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in you, and nothing in life or in death will be able to separate us from your great love in Christ Jesus our Lord." May it be so ...

Jesus tell us "Your brother will rise again"

And Martha & Mary think, Of course he will - he'll be resurrected and won't experience eternal death.

They know this is the case, Martha and Mary know the story. It doesn't help their pain and grief, but they know.

But Jesus knows them. And Jesus weeps with them and for his friend.

The story about Lazarus is a glimpse of what was to come, a foreshadowing of the resurrection of Jesus, and that is the hope of resurrection for us all.

The cross doesn't *cover* up what happened, but it serves now to remind us that there is hope, it is the **tin can of wildflowers** in the midst of tragedy.

The Jesus who had cried with his grieving friends had so much compassion for us that he died on that cross so that we would have the same hope he knew for his beloved friend Lazarus.

This story of the raising of Lazarus gives us hope for the future.

Jesus weeps for Lazarus, showing us that he understands the human condition of sorrow and But he also raises Lazarus, and he will raise us out of whatever pains us in this life, because the compassion of Jesus gives us the ultimate hope of eternal life.

#6 Location: Sanctuary

And then Jesus says to Martha

John 11:25 New International Version (NIV)

25 Jesus said to her,

“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;

I am life and resurrection. I am both and all.

It's not black and white - it's all within my power and glory.

And so, 4 days later.

The day of hopelessness

Lazarus walks out - alive. And we know It's never too late.

That God can do all things that nothing binds His strength. Not death. Not time.

Unbind him and let him go -

But that is not all. That's not even the end of the story.

Jesus tells them “ unbind him and let him go.”

Why does that matter? Jesus can conquer death but he can't take off his burial dressing?

No, he can, but he won't. Because it is not just Jesus that saves Lazaraus - it is the power of the God in the *community* - among his family - that frees him.

This speaks to the importance of community.

Not only is Jesus with you and can Jesus conquer all for you- and he will - but you have people around you- and it's through living into *your full relationship with them* and the power of the Holy Spirit that you are unbound - set free.

Faith can't not be lived alone. Faith is meant to be done within and through community.

This is where we need community. This is where we need others. Often it is the task of Christian community that completes the action of faith - communion and baptism can not be and should not be done alone - they are meant to be done in community. Such is this resurrection of Lazarus.

Such is the work of the church.

Jesus called forth new life, but Lazarus still has burial clothes on.

So Jesus says “unbind him and let him go” and those in his life did so - they - Martha & Mary - completed the final act.

So today - we celebrate that we are the church everywhere we go and in all that we do. Our building is closed and our nerves might be frayed but we are not alone - Jesus is with us - weeping in our time of sorrow and freeing us in our times of hopelessness through the gift of those that surround us in our lives. And we share a new community. In a new space - we make phones, we Facetime our friends, we gather online in Zoom small groups.

Because our faith is made whole in our Christian community and through the church.

A lot of things have ended or maybe even *died* this over the past few weeks that we did not expect. And so we weep for our lost Upward practices and games, we weep for our Upward soccer season, we weep for our cancelled hospital visits or even surgeries. And we are not alone in our sorrow.

But we celebrate that *this is not the end*. That we have a God that can do things within us and among us past our last hope - after the day of death - even 4 days after death.

Nothing can stop our God, and nothing can stop the power of God when we work within a community with one another with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And we celebrate together the time we did enjoy as an Upward community this season.