

Take away the stone*John 11:1-45*

In these surreal days that we are all living through have you noticed how quiet it is? There's a lot less traffic on the roads; there are fewer people walking around on the pavements; there seems a lot more stillness. It is both beautiful and unsettling at one and the same time. What I've noticed around the manse, and when I walk down to the church is the loudness of the bird song. Humans may be locked down, but nature continues to unfold from Winter into Spring. A virus may threaten human life, but the life of the natural world begins to blossom. Scientists tell us that with the reduction in CO2, fewer aeroplanes, fewer cars, fewer factories in operation, the ozone is beginning to heal. The world is quieter.

I wonder if that was what it was like in Bethany, after the death of Lazarus? It's nearly always quiet after a death. Martha and Mary, quietly sobbing. Friends respectfully quiet in the background. When death comes, people often stay indoors, talking in hushed voices.

Too late, Jesus turns up. Delayed, making a point, but there at last. Out of the silence the women come to Him, emerging from their grief-darkened home. First Martha, then Mary. Their words are the same: "If only You had been here..." In Bethany, the place where Jesus often rested and took refuge, with His friends. It was a safe place for Him. Jesus' ministry could not have happened without homes like this, and the love that He found in such homes. In Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, *Bethany* means 'house of affliction.' Here, in this story, the worst kind of affliction: death.

We know very little about Lazarus. He is present in the Bible stories, but he never speaks. Bethany is described as the home of Martha, and her sister Mary, not Lazarus. Some have speculated that Lazarus was an invalid, or disabled. Words describing him in this story suggest someone who was without strength, feeble, insignificant. Yet such a one Jesus loved. And when Lazarus died, Jesus wept. The shortest verse in the Bible, John 11:35 – "Jesus wept." In this story we see another side of the very human Jesus. With the woman at the well in Samaria He was tired; in the

Temple in Jerusalem He is enraged and violent. But here, when His friend dies, He is grief-stricken. Something breaks in Jesus. We're sometimes told that, "big boys don't cry"; but here, Jesus weeps. It's not a sign of weakness, but a sign of honesty. It's the appropriate response to sadness, along with anger, and depression. And maybe something more. For the Christian, even in the midst of loss, is there just the tiniest bit of hope?

Martha had it, and Mary too. They believed, without fully understanding it, life comes after death. Not just Lazarus rising from the dead when Jesus called to him. Lazarus would live for a while longer on earth, but would die again. I think what this story points to is something bigger. That after death, after loss, after the dislocation of time and emotions and existence, life comes.

Like the Spring after the Winter. The dead world comes to life again. With the story of the raising of Lazarus we can be distracted by the 'how' question. Did this event really happen. Whereas we might be better to look at the 'why' question. 'Why does Jesus do this?' And also, 'what does this mean?'

Jesus, with Martha and Mary, and a crowd of mourners, standing by a rock-carved tomb, with a stone rolled across the doorway (which incidentally suggests that this is a monied family). Then into the stifled silence of grief Jesus speaks. "Take away the stone...Lazarus, come out...Unbind him, and let him go."

Last Thursday night, at 8pm, a remarkable thing happened across the United Kingdom. Annemarie Plas, a Dutch woman was inspired by what she saw in her home country, and in other European countries, where people came to the doorways and windows of their darkened homes and encouraged each other by singing, or playing music, or applauding. Particularly applauding health workers and carers. She put something up on her social media, and the idea spread, like a virus of life, and hope, and gratitude, and solidarity. At 8pm on Thursday night I went to my door and applauded, and I could see neighbours up and down the street doing the same. Applauding, cheering, banging pots and pans. Out of the isolation of their homes, people emerged to affirm life, and that we are here to connect, support, engage with the world around us. All those people

coming out of their homes to stand in their doorways, showing they were still alive. “Take away the stone...Lazarus, come out...Unbind him, and let him go.”

Has it taken a death-laden virus that has swept the globe to bring us to the doorways of our lives and realise how dead we might have been, and how full of life we can be? How dark we might have been, and how full of light we can be? How filled with despair we might have been, and how full of hope we can be? On that dark Thursday night, people emerged, and united, and showed what might be when we return to normal.

And as we rush to return to normal, when this current crisis is over, let us use this time to consider which parts of ‘normal’ are worth rushing back to for any of us. Has it been the case that we have often been like Lazarus, in our communities, countries, world, church, surrounded by the deadly culture of selfishness, judging others, pushing people down, ignoring people, isolating people, excluding people?

The dynamic of these recent, terrible days has been quite the opposite. Massive volunteering, small neighbourhood kindnesses, reaching out, paying attention, slowing down, and perhaps becoming more fully alive. Jesus wants us and the world to rise up, come out, be unbound, and become fully alive.

A stone blocked Lazarus’ return to life, and Jesus called for the stone to be taken away. How often in our existence do we find that the greatest hindrance to imagining the possibilities of hope and life are caused by the stone of ignorance and fear and faithlessness? Jesus sees beyond the stone not only the reality of death, because death is real, but the possibility of life.

Death and pain may enfold the beginning of the story of Lazarus, like the graveclothes that bound him. But that is not how the story ends. Hope, life was found unexpectedly. He came from the dark place into the light, and he was set free.

I do not see the Coronavirus as being sent by God. It is not God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world.¹ But by God, when we have sometimes been dead to the world, immobilised by fear, sunk in lethargy and depression, untethered from reality by anxiety, here is Jesus, at the doorway of

whatever metaphorical tomb we might be in, taking away the stone, reaching in, and calling to us to come back to our better selves and live again.

Prodded and pulled and pushed; called and unbound and set free. We can't do it by ourselves. We need help.

Jesus comes to the place of death, is not repelled by the stench, and moves towards it and not away from that which is difficult to experience and bear. And with heartfelt sensitivity, His face still streaked with tears, He calls the deadened to life. He calls the community and the church and the individuals within them to action and service.

Like Lazarus we can all be dead to life. Our circumstances change, we are too busy, too many commitments, our priorities muddled and competing with each other. Crisis comes, and our unacknowledged belief that we are self-made, self-reliant, hermetically sealed against life and insurance paid up evaporates so quickly. We are more dependent than we realise. We never stand wholly apart from our community. These times are theology in action: we are not alone. This is the journey of resurrection we are called to every day. Jesus' radical love removing the blockage, ending the deadness, calling forth life.

In these dark and unsettling days, this remains our hope. "At the threshold of life, hope leads us in."ⁱⁱ

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ C S Lewis, The Problem of Pain

ⁱⁱ Friedrich Schiller