

Here we are, at Week 5 of Lent. Each week, we've taken a closer look at these one-on-ones with Jesus. We spent 40 days in the wilderness with Jesus as he was tempted by the devil. We met with Jesus and Nicodemus in the middle of the night. We encountered the woman at the well who became an evangelist. We witnessed Jesus mixing spit and mud to give sight to the man born blind. Each story told us something about God, something about ourselves, and something about the ministry God has called us into.

Truth be told, there are actually *two* one-on-ones here, one with Martha as Jesus arrives in town and then the brief one with Lazarus when Jesus calls him out of the tomb. I mean, really, there are almost three—though I'm not focusing today on the quick exchange between Jesus and Mary.

At this point in Lent, the season seems to drag, at least for me. I start to feel down. I get stressed. It doesn't much matter what else is going on in the world around me; it's a strange phenomenon—and I'm not the only one whose noticed. I know many people who experience the same thing. It's become a trend among church leader friends of mine to end complaints or worries by saying, "But it's Lent, so who knows how I really feel."

So, maybe you're feeling this way today. Maybe you're tired. Maybe you're grieving something. Maybe you're trying to figure out what to do next. ...Maybe you're feeling a bit like Martha.

Martha has seen their brother, Lazarus, get sick. She watched him deteriorate, caring for him. If she and Mary are unmarried (and we have no reason to assume they aren't), losing their brother would not only mean losing someone they loved, but losing the one person in the world who could care for them. Without husbands, parents, or brothers, or even grown children, they would be moved to the margins of society.

When they realized Lazarus was dying they sent word to Jesus, hoping beyond hope that Jesus would arrive and heal their brother before he died. Jesus *did* arrive, of course, but not in time. By the time he got into town, Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. Imagine what it must have been like for these two sisters. They had been hopeful, but now they are grieving. They are probably feeling a whole host of emotions: anger, frustration, sadness, exhaustion, fear of what comes next.

Martha unleashes these emotions on Jesus. She seems pleased to see him, but disappointed in his timing: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus doesn't brush aside her feelings; he mourns with her, and with Mary. When he calls Lazarus out of the tomb, he anticipates the crowd's reactions. He anticipates that the people will still be wrestling with their emotions and feelings and won't necessarily know the best way to move forward. He helps them out and gives them direction: "Unbind him and let him go."

There are lots of great moments in this chapter, but this is always my favorite: "Unbind him and let him go."

The reading stops after the next verse, but that leaves a lot of important stuff out—it leaves out the reactions of people when they heard what had happened. If we read just a bit further, this is what the Gospel of John tells us:

“⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. ⁴⁶But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. ⁴⁷So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, “What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. ⁴⁸If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.” ...⁵³So from that day on they planned to put him to death.” (John 11:45-53)

In the Gospel of John, it is this sign by Jesus, it is the raising of Lazarus, it is this couple-verse one-on-one that directly precipitates the plotting of his death. Why did they react this way? It might simply be because Jesus was gaining a reputation, but it might also be because of those last words. Perhaps it was the unbinding of Lazarus that would draw the most attention.

Lazarus was bound in his burial clothes. He was wrapped in cloth, surrounded by all the things that marked death. When he is unbound, he is able to rejoin the community. If he was resurrected, but not unbound, he would still be “othered”—he would still be kept on the outside. Unbinding means that his family and neighbors help him moved on from the things that marked him as dead and assist him in embracing new life.

It’s not just Lazarus. It’s not just the dead who are bound, it’s the living, all around us. They are struggling to come back to life; waiting for someone to help them do it. There are people bound by economic struggles, by the unfair expectations of others, by grief, by mental illness, by the social -isms that effect so many of us: sexism, racism, ableism. We are bound. Our fellow siblings in Christ are bound. I truly think that everyone, everywhere, is bound by something, at one time or another.

Jesus call us to unbind them, to unbind each other, to unbind *ourselves*. This might mean comforting one another and speaking words of hope when all feels lost. It might mean reminding each other that we are whole, beautiful, and loved creations of God, even when we fail to meet the demands set by others. It might mean helping people seek out appropriate medical and mental health when stigma or fear makes it seem impossible. It might mean speaking up for all whose voices are marginalized to make every space one where all are welcome.

...and, as was the case with Lazarus, it might mean some complications in the community. When we start pursuing this path, when we truly work on unbinding ourselves and each other, we’re bound to rub some people the wrong way. Some people might feel threatened, feel like their own power or privilege is slipping away, just because the full humanity of others is being recognized.

But we can't cower in fear. We can't put our own safety first, like the Pharisees did. Jesus calls us to action. "Unbind him and *let him go!*" Jesus does the hard part. *God* is the one who brings us back to life, who calls out to us in our death and resurrects us. But as Christians we are called to be more than spectators. We are called to walk with and accompany our fellow human siblings and we do that by unbinding.

It is the unbinding that moves us forward.

We are a community. We care for one another. When someone, like Lazarus, is coming out of their tomb, God makes it so that we are there to help them take the next steps.

Amen.