

Lent5_YrA_040614_mcr
All Saints Episcopal Church

"Unbind him and let him go."

In the name of God, life-giver and liberator of all. Amen.

On Tuesday morning, May 14, 1991, I got a phone call from my brother in Nashville as I was getting ready to go to work. My father, it seemed, had been driving somewhere in his car and had had a heart attack. He had managed to pull off of the road, so no one else had been hurt. And someone had found him and called the paramedics. When they got there, he was unresponsive. They did everything they could to resuscitate him - they had to, because it was the law - so they put him on a ventilator and kept his heart beating with some kind of medicine in an IV, but no one knew how long he had been 'down.'

They took him to the city hospital - the one where they take you if they don't know whether you have insurance or not. When they finally located my mother (it was before the days of cell phones), she rushed to the hospital. She told the doctors that Daddy did not want to be hooked up to a bunch of machines. The doctors told her that they would have to see a living will before they could do anything about the machines and they told her that they had to wait a certain amount of time to see if he would have any brain activity anyway. They were not hopeful.

Some time had passed, and there was no activity. My mother produced Daddy's living will and the doctors had scheduled a time to disconnect everything. You need to come home, my brother said. If you can get here before this afternoon, you can see Daddy and we'll be together when this happens.

I called the airport. This was when American Airlines came to Mobile, and it was possible to fly to Nashville in a little more than an hour. I scheduled a flight, packed a bag and drove to the airport. The flight was supposed to leave around mid-morning. I would get home in time.

But after I'd been in the waiting area of the gate for about 20 minutes, an announcement over the P.A. system said the flight had been delayed. Something

was wrong with the plane and it wasn't going to be getting to Mobile on time from wherever it was originating. It was going to be too late. I was going to be too late.

Everything was too late. Too late to help Daddy. Too late to say goodbye. Too late to hope.

Jesus knows that Lazarus is dead. He tells his disciples so. And only then does he decide to go to Bethany.

He arrives on the fourth day. The day that is beyond all hope. All through Scripture, the third day is the day that God acts. But Jesus arrives on the fourth day, the hopeless day.

Martha is angry. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!" Mary is grief-stricken. She throws herself at Jesus' feet, weeping. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!" Jesus feels their grief and their hopelessness. He weeps at their sorrow.

But then he calls forth life and liberation from the hopeless, gaping hole in the side of the rock - on the hopeless day - in front of a hopeless crowd. He calls forth life in the midst of certain, irreversible, hopeless, stinking death. "Lazarus, come out!"

I imagine that most of us have had the experience of feeling hopeless. Hopeless in the face of failed relationships, in the disappointment of unrealized dreams, in the sadness of all kinds of loss. I certainly felt hopeless on that day as I tried to get to Nashville. But in the dark tomb of our desperation, there is a voice that calls out to us. A voice that calls us by name: "Jim - Pete - Mary, come out!"

Just like Lazarus, life and liberation come for us, the torment of our hopelessness washed away by the tears of Jesus. Lazarus comes stumbling out of the tomb with a new lease on life. And just like Lazarus, we are made able to stand again with dignity -- resurrection. Knowing that death is not the last word, we are free to live; we can stare death in the face without flinching; we can embrace its reality as a part of earthly living, even in our grief, even in our pain.

The name Lazarus means 'God has helped.' No one else could have helped, but God has helped. On the fourth, hopeless day, God has helped.

But Jesus has one more gift to offer in this story. To those who are standing by, who see the sign of God's glory and believe, Jesus gives the task of unbinding Lazarus, of loosing him from the past and helping him to claim the freedom of a new life in Christ.

That is the work of the church, the work of all of us. We still live in a world of death. We lose people, we lose jobs, we lose ourselves, but if we claim the gift of new life that Jesus offers us, we will never die spiritually. We can live each day with hope and be willing again and again, even though it hurts sometimes, to give ourselves to others, with love - to unbind each other from the cords of death, knowing it is the only way to truly live. It is not too late.