

A Sermon Preached at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church,
Oak Park, IL on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 10, 2011
(Year A, RCL) by the Rev. Paris Coffey

(Jesus) cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." John 11:43a - 44

Despite centuries of complaints that *something* is seriously wrong with the human race, we would be dismayed if God ever issued a recall. True, there's little evidence that we have ever operated properly, having failed to follow basic manufacturer's instructions. That doesn't mean, though, that the design is flawed – or that even if it *is* – recall makes sense, since human beings seem formatted to keep going. Some, of course, are ready to let go when the time comes – in general, the ones whose circuits are worn-out or who perceive that they have lasted long enough. Most humans, on the other hand, armed with fervor like the poet Dylan Thomas, “do *not* go gentle into that good night.” At least this was the case with one of our church matriarchs, who at the point of death decided that she did *not* want to let go.

Katherine Ahlborn – the one for whom our parish hall is named – was 94 at the time, if I remember correctly. She had moved to a retirement center some years earlier, but it was a hospital emergency room attendant who called the church one afternoon to say that Katherine was dying. Her friend Mary Jean Sanders took the call, saying to me as she hung up, “It’s time.” Sadness seeped into her voice, and so the two of us headed off – prayer books in hand – to administer “Last Rites” for Katherine. Actually, this service is no longer called *Last Rites* but *Ministration at the Time of Death*, since it turns out that it’s often not *LAST* Rites at all. Still, the purpose of the service is the same, which is to help those who are close to death let go of life with peace of mind and promise of God’s welcome on the other side.

When we arrived, Katherine – as we’d been informed – seemed close to death. Her breathing was thin and laborious, emitting that distinct rattling sound that often comes when death is near. Her skin was cool to the touch and she was unresponsive. We spoke her name, but the nurse said, “I doubt that she hears you,” and so we began the service. She did indeed seem *wholly* unaware that we were there, appearing to be in a coma. When we began the *final* prayers, though, saying, “Depart, O Christian soul, out of this world,” Katherine sat bolt upright on her hospital gurney and virtually shouted, “My name is Katherine Ahlborn and I go to St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church in Oak Park.”

The nurse nearly jumped out of her skin, and immediately began asking Katherine other questions, which she could not answer. It was clear that she knew herself, us, and where she went to church, but beyond that, memory failed her. Nevertheless, Katherine got her point across, announcing with her sudden resuscitation, “Not so fast girlie! I’m not departing from anything but this hospital,” which she eventually did. In fact Katherine lived to celebrate her 95th birthday, although sadly, like Lazarus, she eventually had to go through it all over again. Human beings simply do not live forever – at least not in these bodies; which means that the point of today’s story is about more than the miracle of resuscitation. It’s likewise about more than metaphor – even one as powerful this – where human beings are unbound from whatsoever thwarts new life.

Rather, today’s long Gospel account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead is about the death and resurrection of Christ himself – foreshadowing not just Holy Week and Easter – but drawing attention to the very event that in John’s Gospel gets Jesus killed. We don’t hear this part of the story today, but if we were to read on we’d find that right after Jesus raises Lazarus, the Jewish

leaders plot to put him to death. They plot his death because they're terrified of Jesus' power, for if it goes unchecked, *their* own power will suffer. Consequently, when the Pharisees and high priests hear that Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead, they ask – in verses immediately following today's – “What do we do now? This man keeps on doing things, creating God signs. If we let him go on, pretty soon everyone will believe in him and the Romans will come and remove what little power and privilege we still have” (47a-48).

Apparently fear is its own kind of bondage, especially fear of losing power and privilege. The Jewish leaders, though, refuse to let *that* fear decide their fate, and so decide instead to silence Jesus. They decide to take back control by silencing/restraining someone else, which sadly happens all the time. A parent, for instance, restrains a child so that he or she follows the *parent's* dream and not the child's own. A teacher or pastor silences dialogue, insisting there's only one way to believe and that way is *mine*. A boss restrains an employee's idea or gift because it threatens his or her *own* self-esteem. Or saddest of all, we restrain or silence ourselves, believing that it's safer to think small and attempt little so that we don't fail, or worse, succeed.

We fear change – fear losing control – and so like the Jewish leaders try to silence new life, which in and of itself is a kind of death. It is, as the prophet Ezekiel says, a kind of death where “our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, and we are completely cut off” (Ezekiel 37:12). The good news, though, is that it is in death that new life becomes possible. Death is not the enemy, as Jesus suggests when he hears of Lazarus' illness and delays going to see him. “This illness does not lead to death,” says Jesus, “Rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” Nothing, not even death, is void of God's power and presence. Instead, death – physical or figurative – can be a path to new life in the hands of God.

In fact, this is what God came among us to reveal in the life and death of Jesus Christ, although it can be a hard truth to grasp. It's hard because death – especially physical death – is painful, which Jesus understands all too well. “Jesus began to weep,” John writes, following the Jews' invitation that he “come and see” where the body of Lazarus has been laid. He weeps, though, not just over Lazarus' death, as the Jews surmise, since he knows that his friend is about to be raised. Rather Jesus weeps over the pain that death can bring to humankind. He weeps publically, acknowledging that pain like this cannot be minimized. At the same time, Jesus is “snorting with anger” as the Greek says, or as our watered-down English says, “greatly disturbed,” that human beings cannot or will not see that death is *not* God's final word.

It's not God's final word for Lazarus, even when the time comes for him to die all over again. And it's not God's final word for us, for the truth is that God has not given up on us yet. Indeed, as far as I'm aware, God has no plan to recall the human race, but instead to CALL the human race relentlessly to follow the instructions of our manufacturer. After all, as Jesus tells his followers in the fourteenth chapter John, “The one who believes in me will do the works that I do, and, in fact, will do greater works than these because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12, *NRSV*). And THAT's the real miracle of today's story – not that God does what *we* ask/does *our* will – but that with God's help we are capable of doing *God's*.

In the midst of grief, fear, or doubt, we are capable of seeking God's help. In the bondage of life, we are capable of calling one another out and unbinding those in need of freedom. In the darkness of the tomb, we are capable of hearing God's summons and walking out into the light of day. In short, in the throes of death, believers in Jesus Christ are capable of sitting bolt upright and embracing new life that is charged with the boundless possibilities and promise of the Living God. *Amen.*