

“Surprised by Life”

Text: John 11: 1 - 45

Used: Cong. Church of Naugatuck – 3/6/05

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable unto Thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Fourteen year of ordained ministry...and up until the last month I have always avoided it. What is that you might ask? Preaching on the story of the raising of Lazarus. I don't know why that has been...I guess the story of Lazarus has just never felt right to me before. I never know what to do with the fact that one of Jesus closest friends is dying and yet he waits a couple of days before going to see him. The story of the raising of Lazarus is so long and so complicated that it always feels like there is more to handle than you can do in just one sermon. And it's a story of resurrection...and a story of resurrection in the middle of Lent always seems to feel out of place to me. So I'll admit it. I've avoided talking about this story for many years.

So what has brought me around to this story now, you might wonder? Well, I think it is the fact that I've started reading the story backwards. No...not literally. But I've started understanding the story in terms of one of the last things said...when Jesus tells the people, “unbind him and set him free”...and that has changed my whole perspective on this story. No longer then is this a story I can't relate too. No longer is it a story about a miracle far bigger than anything I've ever experienced. Rather this idea of needing to be unbound and set free to live is something I feel like I can relate to. It often feels to me that I can become so

bound up by life's routine and pressures and challenges that I can forget to be surprised by life.

There was a woman who I met in La Romana who really got me thinking about this. I suspect she was somewhere in her eighties. She had come to the hospital that day to be fitted for a hearing aid. Much to my surprise, the doctor who was doing testing for and distributing the hearing aids, brought the women over to me and said, "I think your going to be of more help to her than I can be". For the life of me, I couldn't figure out what he meant. He went on to explain that he had tested the woman and his diagnosis was that she had hysterical deafness. It seems that ever since the hurricane hit last fall, she has been unable to hear...well, mostly...she's been unable to hear anyone but her own daughter...and I think that was only selectively. The doctor said there was absolutely nothing he could do for her...but perhaps if I prayed with her I could help her hear again. I must admit, I was a little unsure of this course of treatment...it being my first real try at "faith healing" and all. But I knew what the doctor was asking of me was not to bring healing to her ears, but to remind her enough of God's love and God's grace that it could bring healing to her soul. After all, it was a wounded soul, not wounded ears, which were causing her to tune out life. Still, I was a bit anxious about whether I could pull this off. First, I was dressed in a t-shirt, shorts, work boots and a ball cap – not exactly the type of clerical attire to convince someone you have a close connection with God. Secondly, I couldn't speak the same language as this woman (...which, I must admit, I later realized was a stupid thought since she wasn't supposed to be able

to hear me anyway.) By this point, the daughter had conveyed to her mother that I was a pastor and I was going to pray for God to comfort her so that her hearing might return. Putting all my trepidations aside, I put my hand on the woman's shoulders and prayed with her for about five minutes. Now, I don't have any great miracle to report. Before she left, the woman was somewhat responsive when I would say something but still not very responsive to anyone else. I guess I'll never truly know if our time prayer eventually made a difference to this woman.

I find myself thinking a lot about this woman though. I wonder what she could have experienced ...what she could have heard during that hurricane...that could have so bound her up as to cause her not to hear. And I still pray for her as well...not so much that she is able to hear again...but that she be unbound from what ever holds her captive and cuts her off from the sounds of life. I pray that she will be set free to truly live again.

I know this woman is somewhat an extreme example. But I think in other ways we can become a lot like this woman. I think there are things in our lives which can so bind us up that we become blind, that we become deaf, that we become ignorant to life happening right in front of us. The things that bind us are most likely different for all of us... and different for us at different times. We may find ourselves bound by our grief, by our fears, by our lusts, by our need for success, by the pressures to be someone we're not, by virtually anything that closes us off from ways God brings life to our world.

If you ever feel like you are bound up...well, the story of the raising of Lazarus is the story for you. You see, it is not just Lazarus who is bound up in this story. We find Mary and Martha bound up by their grief. We find the disciples bound up with fear that Jesus is leading them in a direction which will only get them in trouble. We find the people at the tomb bound up by the fact that there are certain times when stench of the realities of life and death are so pungent that they are not to be looked at. What happens to all these people who are so bound up? They find themselves surprised by life. They are surprised that God can bring hope to what seem like a hopeless situation. The Lazarus story says to each one of us that whenever we find ourselves bound up, Jesus cries out to us out with a loud voice, "Come out!" Come out from the self-imposed tombs of nonliving, of mere existence, and into the fresh air, the breath of God.

Now, the ways in which God surprises us with life aren't often through big miracles...at least in my experience. More often they are through the slow persistent nurture. There is a story of a child was running down the hall at church on the last day of Bible School. He had in his hand a little ceramic tray that he had made for his mother. He had worked on it all week. As he ran down the hall to give it to her, he dropped it and it broke into a thousand pieces. The child began to cry. Everybody was trying to comfort him. They said, "It was just a tray." But the child was inconsolable. Finally, his mother came on the scene. She said to the child, "Let's pick up all of the pieces, and we will take them home and put it together and see what we can make out of it." I think God is much like this mother. God understands when and how we hurt. Yet God is able to look upon

our brokenness, help us pick up the pieces, and convince us that new life can even come from what has been shattered.

That morning in the hospital in La Romana, I met another woman...this time a young girl walking in the hallway...who reminded me of the amazing things God can do. Just about the time the older woman was leaving, I ran into Heidi Sullivan who started telling me about a visit she and Tori Bosse had at a local orphanage. She told me about this girl who climbed up into her lap and started playing peak-a-boo with her. She later found out that the girl was thought to have been deaf from birth. The hearing aid doctor was still hanging around at this time ... and upon hearing the story asked us, "Can we get her here? I want to test her." Heidi quickly scurried off to make the arrangements. About an hour later, I ran into Tori and Heidi walking around with this young girl. It seems that the test proved that she was profoundly hearing impaired, but not completely deaf. She had been able to be fitted with a solar powered hearing aid. For what was most likely the first time in her memory, she was hearing the sounds of life. Walking the halls, that young girl had such a big smile that I swear you could see joy and wonder and amazement radiate from her face. All I could think to say to her was, "you look so happy". Her smile got even bigger.

It is amazing, on a day when I met the older woman and found myself bound up with wondering, "What difference can faith make?", I also found myself graced by meeting this girl who reminded me that I can still be surprised by life.

I wish I could give to each of you such an experience...an experience of being surprised by life. Yet it seems the best I can offer is the story of Lazarus.

But perhaps, using Joy Cowley's, little poem entitled "Lazarus", I can remind all of us of how God can surprise us with life, unbinds us and set us free:

I don't intend it to happen.
It just sneaks up on me
and before I know it
there's been a kind of death,
part of me wrapped in a shroud
and buried in a tomb
while the rest of me stands by
wondering why the light has gone out.
Then you, my Friend, all knowing,
seek me out and knock
at the edge of my heart,
calling me to come forth.
I argue that I can't.
Death is death and I'm too far gone
for story book miracles.
But you keep on calling me,
"Come forth! Come forth!"
and the darkness is pierced
by a shaft of light
as the stone begins to move.

My friend,
I don't know how you do it
but the tomb has become
bright as day, as bright as love,
and life has returned.

Look at me!
I'm running out,
Dropping bandages all over the place.

Amen.