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The Death of Lazarus:

New Life comes in stages...

John 11: 1-45*

St. George's, Milford

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry

I propose to show that Lazarus' story of resurrection offers to us three insights into how we might encounter the possibility of resurrection in our own lives, so that those hearing this sermon might be aware of how we can assist or avoid this transformation.

May the God who Creates us...

Good Morning!

Do you want to change things in your life?

Do you want to re-arrange your world?

In this Lent have you found yourself struggling with attitudes or habits, old systems or beliefs to which you feel bound? Ways of being in the world that feel limiting, constraining, binding, or even death inducing?

What might we learn from Jesus and Lazarus...?

Word comes to Jesus, your dear friend Lazarus, is ill.

Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, scared that their beloved brother will die call upon Jesus: Come. Come. Come. "The one you love is ill." (John 11:3)

Jesus nods, hears the request and waits. Two days later he says, "Let's go back to Judea." The disciples respond, the last time we were there some of the religious authorities wanted to stone you." (John 11:8) and by association us too....so maybe it's time to lay low, stay put, to maybe not go back....

Then Jesus says, "Lazarus has died." Let's go to him.

I can only imagine how this turn of events is met amidst his disciples. Lazarus is dead, which is sad. But us going back could just make for even more dead people....

Then Thomas, the apostle Thomas, the one of "doubting Thomas" fame says, "Let's go, Let's go with Jesus. If they kill him we can all die together." (John 11:16)

I'm betting you can hear the crackle of the disciple's anxiety as they journey back to Bethany. It's no small wonder that it took them awhile to get there, not many people I know like to walk fast to their possible death.

When they finally arrive in town, word it out, Lazarus is now four days in this tomb. Martha hears that Jesus has arrived. She runs to greet him.

With agonizing sorrow amazing faith, Martha says, "If you had been here, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (John 11:21) "I know that he will rise on the last day." But frankly, sometimes that belief is not enough. We can believe and believe in God's promise of eternal life, but there are moments when we will let go of all eternity for just one more flesh and blood, one more muscle and bone encounter. One more hug, one more laugh, one more look in the eye.

If you had been here he would not have died. Where were you?
Why weren't you here?

Jesus asks Martha to send her sister. Mary runs to Jesus, and greets him with the same words, prostrate at his feet, filled with the agony of death, the pain of despair, "Lord if you had been here, he would not have died."

Jesus, sees her tears and feels her sadness and he too is overcome with grief. Death and loss is palpable. He begins to cry. Probably not the first or last time he cries over our pain.

Then he asks Mary, "Where they have laid Lazarus' body?"
Despite her anguish and thinly veiled accusations, Jesus does not shy away from her pain. Nor does he turn from intimacy and connection.

A new way of being is beginning...

He goes to the tomb, scripture says he is greatly disturbed, it's a cave and a stone covers the entrance. Does it harken in him a future foreboding?

Jesus says, "Remove the stone."

"No no no says, Martha he has been in the tomb four days, the smell will be too much!"

Don't do it, don't alter our reality, the odor will overwhelm, we cannot abide with this discomfort. Do not let the smell of despair fill our senses.

But Jesus continues, past their fears, distress and disease. He stays connected.

He prays and says, "Lazarus, come out!"

Scripture tells us, "The dead man comes out, his feet bound, his hands tied, the burial cloth over his face."

Jesus says, "Unbind him." Jesus raises him, Jesus returns him to life, but Lazarus is still bound up. Still wrapped and burdened with his death clothes. When Jesus is raised his

shroud is in the corner, shrugged off forever. Lazarus comes forth still wrapped in decay. Unable to release himself he needs the people, the witnesses, his sisters and his friends to help him. Here's the thing—not one of us can embrace new life—given to us by God—none of us can embrace new life without help from our friends.

Death in any way or form cannot just be slothed off like last week's reptilian skin. We need help emerging into something new.

Others must come and loose him from the bonds of death.

Change, deep abiding transformation, literal or metaphorical in this world, must be asked for and sought after and named.

Where is the body? Jesus asks, "Where have you lain him?"
What is it that needs to be changed? Name it.

Then, no matter how much we or anyone around us longs for this change, this new life, resistance will always be around. Even from those who say they want the change the most.

Jesus said, "Remove the stone."
Martha replies, "No Lord---the smell will be too much. He's been in the tomb four days,"

Don't do this Lord, I'm not sure I can stand this—new assault. I'm accustomed to this sadness and pain, do not make me or anyone else endure something new.

Lastly—Jesus says—to the community around, "Unbind him." As theologian Veronice Miles says, "Releasing persons and communities of faith from the clutches of death also demands something of us..." (p 144 *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2*)

We need help, all of us need the assistance of others to live into a new way of being, life altering change and transformation does not happen without a community of saints waiting to assist.

Do we long for change?

May we like Jesus and Lazarus---name the pain, expect resistance—and commit to helping each other. Not even Jesus can change our world without our participation.

Amen.