

St Mark's, Niagara on the Lake
The Fifth Sunday in Lent, year 'A'
26 March 2023
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

"In 1937, I began, like Lazarus, the impossible return." So begins Whittaker Chambers's remarkable memoir *Witness* in which he recounts his decision to stop spying for the Soviets and return to the United States as a journalist, a decision which was truly a matter of life or death. One false move and he would have been exterminated in one of Stalin's purges. Obviously, that didn't happen, and once he was free and in the clear, he experienced an overwhelming sense of elation.

Even so, he had mixed emotions. "This elation was not caused by any comparison of the world I was leaving and the world I was returning to," he writes. "By any hard-headed estimate, the world I was leaving looked like the world of life and of the future. The world I was returning to seemed, by contrast, a graveyard."

Such feelings are not uncommon for those who find themselves beginning a new stage in life, be it leaving home, or getting married, or starting a new job—or, indeed, learning how to cope with the death of a loved one. We see these feelings play out in this morning's gospel text. Mary and Martha are reeling from the death of their brother Lazarus—so much so that Mary remonstrates Jesus, saying, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." She cannot come to terms with what has happened; she is yearning in that poignant way we all do at times like these to have things put back the way they were.

And here's the thing: she gets her wish—at least in part. Lazarus *is* raised from the dead. He *is* given back to his sisters. Life resumes its normal and comfortable rhythm. Or does it? Remember Jesus said to those standing by, "Unbind him, and let him go," but I wonder if he was talking about something other than funerary bindings.

There's a remarkable statue by Sir Jacob Epstein in the ante-chapel of New College, Oxford of Lazarus, who's bound by almost mummy-like bands, his arms pinned to his side and his head twisted uncomfortably down and to the left. Like all great works of art, it can be appreciated on many levels. On a superficial level, it depicts Lazarus at the moment he has been raised. But on another level, a symbolic level, it depicts a man who is not only physically bound, but spiritually bound, too. He can't reach out in front of him on account of his arms being pinned to his side, nor can he look ahead since his head is twisted, turning uncomfortably as if to glance back over his shoulder.

Even though we're still on our Lenten journey, and have yet to make the most harrowing part of it, today we are asked to consider what the point of this entire journey is. Most of us dislike Lent because we think of it as a time that's unremittingly grim, and lifeless, and bleak. But it shouldn't be. The Lenten disciplines are here to

help us let go of the things that bind us, the things we so longingly keep trying to glance back at, the things which are killing us. You see, if we don't learn to let go, if we end our Lenten journey as we began it—in emotional, psychological, and spiritual straightjackets—we won't be able to reach out to receive the gift of new life offered to us by the risen One of whom Lazarus's resurrection is but a type and shadow.

But I am still haunted by that command of Jesus: unbind him, and let him go. Whatever else it may have been that Lazarus was raised to, it certainly wasn't his old life. There was no way he could go back to the same old, same old, although we can imagine that his family and friends were expecting him to do just that. So when Jesus says, "Unbind him, and let him go," I think he was telling them to stop restricting him with their own expectations, to let him go to live the new life he was given, to let him be free to embrace this new life and let go of the one that had been. No more looking back.

We want to determine outcomes and to control destinies, be it of our children or our partners or our families—and it's a terrible thing to realize how much power we have over the destinies of those we love. Jesus tells—he commands—those of us who were bound, who could only look back, who were entombed, but who have taken hold of resurrection life, to stop binding others to destinies which have nothing to do with divine initiative. He says to us, "Unbind them and let them go." In the garden on Easter Day the risen Jesus says to Mary, "Do not hold on to me." Or, in the words of an 80s pop song, "If you love somebody, set them free": free to rise to the life Christ is calling them to. Free to embrace the future. Free to live for God rather than for others.

Ezekiel looked out on a valley of dry bones and couldn't believe that they could come alive. Likewise, we can't believe that there is anything beyond our present graves but more graves. Indeed, this world of death seems more alive than the promised world of life. These are the fears Whittaker Chambers grappled with. What I didn't tell you at the beginning was that he was made strong by a renewed commitment to the Christian faith and its promise of new life. It was this faith and those promises which freed him—even in the face of what seemed to be certain death.

And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.