

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

March 26, 2023 – LENT 5, Yr. A

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Sermon: “*Take Away the Stone!*”*

Ezekiel 37:1-14 (God gives life to the dry bones)
Psalm 130 (Out of the depths I call to the Lord)
Romans 8:6-11 (We are to set our minds on the Spirit, and not on the flesh)
St. John 11:1-45 (Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead)

You know how you feel when you scour the store for deals, and proudly hand the checker your coupons, only to hear, “I’m sorry, but these have expired.” Or you rush and rush to get to the theater, but by the time you get there, the ushers have closed the doors and won’t let you in until intermission? There are many occasions in life when we find it’s too late to take advantage of an opportunity. Aside from losing out on coupons or missing the first two acts of a show, there are other, more serious events that can pass us by, and we never get another chance. However, as we hear in today’s Gospel story, when it comes to salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, it is never too late—as long as we are alive on earth.

Jesus and His disciples are hanging out when they receive a message from His friends Martha and Mary, that their brother Lazarus is ill. Naturally, Jesus’ companions want Him to rush to his friend’s bedside to offer healing prayers. But Jesus does not seem concerned, because, He says, “this is not an illness that will lead to death.” His disciples figure that as the Messiah who knows all things, surely Christ is aware that Lazarus’ sickness is not terminal, and since the situation is not dire, He declines to call on the family. Yet, not long after this, Jesus announces to them that Lazarus has died. And so, they turn toward Bethany, where Lazarus has been entombed in a cave, as was the custom in ancient Israel.

By the time Jesus arrives, it has been four days since the death, three since the burial. Codified in the 3rd to 5th-century Babylonian Talmud was the Jewish belief that after death, a person’s soul lingers around the body for three days, hoping it will return to life. But on the fourth day, it returns to God, to await the resurrection.¹ So, by the fourth day, an individual was considered truly *dead*. Moreover, Jews did not embalm their dead, nor place them in a casket—as we know from reading the Gospel account of Jesus’ own death and burial. The bodies of the deceased were simply wrapped in a linen shroud, and placed in a stone cave, in front on which was rolled a heavy stone to seal the opening from grave robbers and wild animals.

Without embalming, in that Middle-Eastern heat the stench of a decaying body would have been dreadful. It’s no wonder the grieving sisters don’t want Jesus to even *think about* opening the tomb. But an interesting thing is happening here, and it has to do with how faith works. First, let’s back up to when Jesus arrived, and Mary complained: “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.” How could you be so negligent? You could have healed him! Why did you let him die? The woman is furious, and rightly so.

Instead of comforting Mary and Martha, Jesus says, “Take away the stone.” “*What??* Jesus, are you crazy? Surely you know what condition Lazarus is in, and how much he stinks! That’s just not practical. It doesn’t make any logical or biological sense.” Earlier, in verse 27, Martha told Jesus she believes He is “the resurrection and the life.” And now Jesus is challenging her faith. In verse 40, He tells her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So He makes one simple request: “Take away the stone.”

When it seems as though something in our life has died, or been walled up, and we feel as though we are between a rock and a hard place, God may ask something of us that makes absolutely no sense—at least, to *our* minds.

Here, His request to the mourners is not logical. Lazarus is literally between a rock and a hard place. He is behind a stone. And Jesus asks the mourners to remove the stone without giving them any more information.

But you see, when God is getting ready to do something significant in your life that involves a deliverance from a situation gone bad, or a resurrection of a relationship that has died, it will often include an illogical request. And I want to encourage you, when that happens, don't go logical on God. What we often do with God in situations like that is debate the instructions, just as Martha did. Jesus' instruction to her was simple: "Take away the stone!"

With God, it's not about logic. It's about doing what He tells us to do, in *faith*. Jesus doesn't want to have a debate about the stone that He has told you to remove. He doesn't need to know how big the stone is, or how long it's been there, or how dead whatever it is you've buried in that cave of your life, or how much your past stinks to high heavens. All Jesus wants you to do is take away the stone.

He's telling Mary, Martha, and all of us, that to experience the resurrection power of Christ in our lives, to tap into the glory of God bringing life out of death, and newness out of what is worn and long-buried, faith must precede sight. For Martha and Mary to remove their brother's grave stone without having *any idea* what Jesus will do next is the act of faith He is requesting from them. It involves trusting that He who is the Resurrection and the Life will do only what will be for their good and to glorify God.

The Lord does not ask us to see and *then* believe. That would not be faith. He asks us to believe, *so that* we may see. Hebrews 11:1 tells us, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." In other words, faith requires no empirical evidence to validate what God is doing. There is nothing to taste, smell, touch, hear, or see in order for you to believe. There is nothing that your five senses can grab onto, because if there is, then that's no longer faith. You don't have to see something to know it's real.

Take, for example, love. You can't taste, smell, touch, hear, or see love, but you know it's there. You experience it in a profound and moving way, every time you look into your grandchild's eyes, take the hand of your beloved, or cradle that favorite cat or dog in your arms. Because you know love, you act on it. Jesus also asks us to act on our faith: "Take away the stone."

So, how do you know when you have faith? You know that you have faith when you have both the courage and the obedience to take away the stone, when you do that thing God has asked you to do, even if it makes no earthly sense. If you're not doing what He told you to do, then you're not having faith. If you're debating it with God, you're not at the point of faith yet; you're at the point of discussion. If you're considering your options, you're not at the point of faith yet; you're at the point of thought. You're not at the point of faith until God sees that stone *move*.

What can you expect to happen when you remove the stone? Jesus told Martha that if she would believe, she would see the "glory of God." The glory of God is seeing the Lord manifest Himself in *your* situation, whatever that may be. And because God is love, and the mercy of Christ is endless, as long as we are on this earth, it's never too late for Jesus to bring new life to situations that have died. He wants to save spiritually dead souls, resurrect dead marriages, make moribund careers come alive once more, and to revive lifeless relationships with our family members, friends, or fellow church members.

Mary and Martha did not, and could not make life come forth. All they did was remove the stone at Christ's word. Then *He* did the miracle! Some of you here this morning are praying for a miracle. Something in your life, your heart, your soul, or your relationships, has died, and you need Jesus to call it back to life. Someone is trapped in a tight, dark place, and the stone seems like it won't budge. You've tried everything that you know to get out of it but it doesn't seem to work. What you need is a resurrection. And the fact that Jesus came late to the scene and still raised Lazarus from the dead should give you hope that it's never too late for Christ to act in your life.

But remember: Mary and Martha *called for Jesus*. They invited Him to come to them. Christ will come to you, too, if and when you call Him. Then, if you will have faith to remove that stone, God can take that which is dead or dying in your life, and call forth a resurrection. He can take what looks like a rotting situation and give it new life. He's just waiting for you to call on Him—and for you to remove the stone. When we do what God says to do in faith, God is free to bring forth new life.²

As we prepare to conclude our Lenten journey, and will next week embark upon the holiest week of the year—the week that changed eternity—let us take heart that the core message of the Gospel is always new life for sinners who come to the Lord in faith.

Through His grace, may we be renewed in body, mind, and spirit, so that at Easter, we may celebrate Christ's resurrection with abundant thanksgiving and fullest joy. *Amen*.

* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 2 April 2017, St. John's Episcopal Church, Compass. Used with permission.

¹ "Does the Talmud talk about a resurrection 3 days after the end of the world?" [JewsforJudaism](https://jewsforjudaism.org/knowledge/articles/does-the-talmud-talk-about-a-resurrection-3-days-after-the-end-of-the-world), <<https://jewsforjudaism.org/knowledge/articles/does-the-talmud-talk-about-a-resurrection-3-days-after-the-end-of-the-world>> 14 March 2023.

² Adapt. Tony Evans, "Remove the Stone," 17 October 2010, [LifeToday](https://lifetoday.org/connect/words-of-life/remove-the-stone/). <<https://lifetoday.org/connect/words-of-life/remove-the-stone/>> 14 March 2023. Used with permission.