



Church of St John the Evangelist, Elora
March 26 2023 - Fifth Sunday in Lent
Canon Paul Walker

“If you were here, my brother would not have died.”

In the old city of Jerusalem, before you enter through the immense old wooden doors of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, in the stone lintel across the top of the door is carved an image of the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, with the words “I am the resurrection.”

There is no other cathedral, church, chapel or burial ground in the world that has a tomb which is empty. This is the only one. The church was first constructed by Constantine’s mother, Helena, as a way to pay tribute to the site where Jesus was crucified, and the site, not far away, where Jesus was buried. It has been expanded and built on over the centuries, and today it is an enormous yet complicated labyrinth of chapels, stairs, corridors and naves that can be quite disorientating. Eastern Orthodox, Coptic and Armenian traditions all lay claim on the various parts of the church, and uniquely, as an ancient gesture of peace and protection, there is Muslim family who are the keeper of the keys to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

The site of crucifixion, known as Golgotha, in the old stone quarry, is just beyond the door. But the first thing you encounter when you enter is a massive stone table, much like an altar, called the anointing stone. It is where pilgrims commemorate that Jesus’ body was prepared for burial both before his arrest, and after it was removed from the cross. The women wrapped Jesus’ body with linens and a hundred pounds of spices. Today, pilgrims bring their own burial linens and anoint them with oil on this stone as a way to connect their own death with Jesus’ and with the story of Lazarus, in the hope that they too will participate in the resurrection. As you enter this church it is a powerful image to be confronted by first by death, with the anointing stone and Golgotha, before you encounter new life with the empty tomb.

On hearing the news that his dear friend Lazarus is ill, Jesus travels to Bethany on the third day. But he is too late. Lazarus has died. Moved to tears at the news of the death of his dear friend, Jesus goes to the site of the tomb, and asks that the stone be removed from the tomb. There is resistance.

He has been dead now for four days. There will be a stench.

This now is the 7th and final of Jesus' great signs in the gospel of John. Each of them revealing the glory of God, with the result the people believe in him.

When the dead man comes out of the tomb, wrapped in linen wrappings, Jesus instructs his friends to do what Jesus had been doing for countless numbers of others. Whether it be the blind man who could not see, the paralytic who could not walk, the lepers who could not be with others, the adulterous woman bound by fear, the hosts of the wedding banquet bound by shame, or the multitude starving in the wilderness, Jesus says the same thing to all of them as he does to Lazarus' friends when Lazarus, still bound by the linen burial cloths, walks out of the tomb. Jesus offers the same words to Lazarus' friends that were offered to the Hebrew slaves in Egypt: "Unbind him, and let him go."

Whether it be the coils of guilt or resentment, the bonds of anger or bitterness, the chains of blame and oppression, they are all the linen wrappings from a tomb of death and a valley of dry bones that paralyze us and hold us in bondage as though we were still in Egypt or still in the tomb.

"Unbind him, and let him go."

"I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly," Jesus says. The blind man, the paralytic, the multitude in the wilderness, the woman accused of adultery, Lazarus in the tomb, and our Hebrew ancestors who were slaves being led out of bondage into a great Exodus are all signs for us that we are set free.

This is what Mary sang about in the Magnificat and it is what Zechariah sang about in the Benedictus. Here is the agent, the vehicle, the commissary who will be able to undo the power of all that threatens to oppress us, bind us, diminish us and destroy us. For Lazarus, critically it is his friends who undo the linen wrappings. For the paralytic, it was his friends who lower him through the roof. For the multitude in the wilderness it was the boy with the fish and loaves and the disciples who feed them all. For the disciples it was Mary who ran back to bring them the news, "I have seen the Lord!"

For us, it is one another, the power of community, that helps us, prays for us, visits us, and listens to us so that we too might also be released from the linen wrappings and participate fully in this great event of the undoing of death; and discover through Christ that we have been unbound and set free.