

Come Forth and Live  
John 17-44  
Rev. Loren McGrail

*Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive,  
and go do it because what the world needs  
is people who have come alive.  
Howard Thurman*

Unbeing dead isn't alive.  
e.e. cummings

In our Gospel story about Lazarus, Jesus comes late to Mary and Martha's home--- four days late. Martha chastises him for not getting there sooner because he might have been able to do something to prevent their brother's death. If only you...

I identify with this passage because we, who are activists working on a just peace in Palestine, hear about tragedies after they had occurred. So, there is always this sense of deep sadness that if we had done something more, signed more petitions, written more op- eds, attended more protests, we could have prevented this. If only we could have put more pressure on the US to stop its flow of military aid, to have been more successful with our boycotts, divested more, just done more, period. If only...

And because we care, like Jesus, we weep for our slain sisters and brothers, the children detained, tortured, or imprisoned, the families made homeless through home demolitions or impoverished because their trees were uprooted or burned. Like Jesus we weep.

When I was an Ecumenical Accompanier for the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program for Israel and Palestine (EAPPI) back in 2011 we would often arrive just after the olive trees had been destroyed, or a few hours after a village had been terrorized by a night raid by Israeli soldiers. We came after. And so, we often wondered what if we had

been able to come before? Could we in our magic EAPPI vests have stopped the raid or saved the house? Our accompaniment came after the fact and we often wondered if this coming at this time was enough. We had buckets of tears for what we saw or witnessed, and we wrote voluminous reports for the UN but it never felt enough.

The story of Lazarus reminds us that there is more.

Palestinians have often told me that that they identify with Lazarus, the entombed Lazarus. Once at the Sabeel Center for Liberation Theology at a Thursday Bible Study I heard Omar say, “I am Lazarus. I feel entombed by this occupation. I can’t move because of this very large stone.” According to Rev. Naim Ateek, the leader of that discussion, removing the stone is only the first step. The second step is to come out and risk being alive again and free. ‘Rise, Lazarus. Come Forth.’ “It is not enough to roll away the stone if you don’t come out and dare to live”, said Ateek.

For over five years in Palestine, I saw this part of the story enacted, mostly on Fridays, when after prayers Palestinians marched in defiance of their entombment, against the chains of the occupation--- the illegal wall, confiscation of land, prisoners, or more settlements. I saw youth as young Ahed and her cousin Janna from Nabi Salah, stand up to the soldiers invading their homes and land in defiance. I saw farmers continue to plant their olive trees when the armed settlers came to burn or destroy them. And like you who might have watched the news of the latest violence in Gaza, I saw the youth run to the fence to plant their flag and run back trying not to get killed by a sniper’s bullet. Like David, I saw them sling rocks at heavily armed soldiers or tanks. I saw the Palestinians nonviolently resisting their entombment, their imprisonment.

Lazarus rises every day in Palestine because to exist there and not lose your hope or humanity is indeed a form of resistance. Jesus does not weep, dear ones, because his good friend died and now stinks. He weeps because he entered the country of death and despair which everyone believed in.

Even Martha, dear Martha, didn't want him to remove the stone because the stench was so strong, so deep was her belief in death's finality. Jesus weeps for Mary and Martha and for all us who live in the valleys and shadows of death.

But this is not enough. We must come out, come forth. And finally, like Lazarus still wearing his burial clothes, his bandages, we must come unbound. Lazarus is not free until he is unbound, and neither are we.

Removing the stone is the first part, coming forward the second, but this is not enough unless we can unbind one another to walk in freedom. For this we need community. The community must unbind him from his death shroud.

I have on occasion experienced the holiness of this moment too when I saw the men denied access to Al Aqsa kneel on the ground in the street to pray together. Their prayerful defiance was an act of faith and hope and it was done communally. When I watched my fellow activists, Palestinians and internationals, resist not only arrest but retaliatory violence by sitting in the cup of the bulldozer to stop the demolition of a Bedouin village, I felt like I was watching the unbinding of fear and the binding of solidarity.

When I see the people of the world, like you, put pressure on Israel to end the occupation, obey international law and respect human rights, I see the entombed Lazarus struggling to become free. Our work for a just peace is a process just like this: removing stones, calling forth, and unbinding ourselves from hopelessness and despair.

So, weeping is good. It shows you still have compassion. It is the right place to start but it cannot end there. We must remove the stones that entomb us. This can be done individually or collectively or through faith. But then it is up to the individual to step forth, to risk being alive in a culture that wants you dead. Make no mistake being Palestinian whether in Israel or the Occupied Territories and East Jerusalem; whether Christian or Muslim, puts you at risk. This is why the standard way I said goodbye to my friends was "Mas Salameh" (peace to you), stay safe."

Our work as peacebuilders is to do what we can to roll away as many stones as we can but only the Palestinian people themselves can walk out---define what sovereignty should look like.

That means we don't get to decide that they must have a two- state solution or even a one democratic state. This is their decision to make. Our task is to assist in the unbinding, to stand with them, hold the authorities that be accountable, drink endless cups of tea, dance dabke, plant or harvest olive trees.

So dear ones, this is the good news, our sisters and brothers who have been entombed will rise with or without us. The question is where are we in the story? Are we standing there paralyzed by the force of our own weeping? Are we working or chipping away at the stone through our church resolutions, our endless calls to our elected officials? Or are we throwing stones of anger at the stone? Are we bowing our heads in despair or prayer? Are we entombed by our own problems? The demise of our own nation-state for the moral compass we once had or seemed to have lost? Has the global pandemic sucked the air out of us to think about anything else but ourselves?

Wherever we are on this journey, we are called to come forth and live, in spite of our fears, stench, or shrouds. God calls each of us to come out of our tombs. And once out, to allow ourselves to be unbound, released or freed by our families, loved ones, or communities. Shackle free, no longer afraid of death, we can then become part of God's liberatory plan to call forth and unbind others. Blessed it be this tie that binds and unbinds. Let it be so. Let it begin with us so we all can rise together.