

WHAT IS YOUR CAVE

Think about a more primitive time. There aren't rules, there aren't the traditions. This is before Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and the Chosen People. What there is, is the experience of life and life is hard. And life seems very, very unfair. And it can be brutal. It can end quickly and there aren't a lot of resources. Survival is the thing. People then had an experience of life and an experience of death. What did they think it meant? Why are any of us here? They didn't have any of the things we have to draw upon to give us meaning and help us to understand. They had none of that. All they had was their experience and their minds, trying to make sense. Why are we here? Why does my little one suffer? Why don't things work out the way we want them to work out.

They would think. When we really plan and try and the crop fails and then it's over so quickly. And what happens to us when we die? There are questions. Human beings have questions about these things. When you live in a very sophisticated time, you can shelve the questions, but deep inside every single person, those questions are still there. What's it all about? Why am I here? What does it mean? Is it all over when I die?

But for us right now we believe God has a plan. God knows that we ask these questions. God knows where they came from. God knows the effect of sin on the creatures that he has put on this planet. And so He says, I have to go to them. I will speak to them. I hope they hear my voice. And so, for 2000 years God does that. And we struggled to hear his voice. And then he says, I'll send my best, my beloved. And they will listen to him. They will hear his voice. And that's Jesus. And so, Jesus comes. When he bursts on the scene finally when he is 30 years old and he starts to do wonderful things: heal this blind person, cure this deaf person. Let this man walk who couldn't walk. Let that leper go back to his family after the years of isolation, When he feeds the 5,000, when he forgives sins and doesn't condemn the adulterous woman, saying "is there no one to condemn you? Neither do I condemn you, but go and avoid this sin."

He brings forgiveness. He does great deeds, miraculous things. He brings the dead back to life. There's the little girl, the daughter of Jairus, who dies and they're mourning in her room and Jesus comes, he takes her by the hand and the little girl who is dead is raised up. It's the same word in Greek, 'arise' that the Evangelists use of Jesus on Easter. Jesus confronts death. He came to confront death. "By the envy of the devil, death entered the world." And so, Jesus has come to restore life and to challenge the realm of the devil. And that's what he's doing when he confronts death. Because that is the devil's ultimate power. "I'll take your life and snuff it out and you'll be mine."

Jesus raises another dead person. The widow who lived in the town of Nain, her only son, she's burying him. They're in the funeral procession. Jesus is coming with his men into that town. They stop and he raises his hand and he prays. And the dead man comes to life. Jesus gives him back to his mother. I wonder if Mary, his own mother, who also has an only son and is also a widow, I wonder if she ever heard that he restored the son to the widow of Nain.

And then there's today, Lazarus, Mary, Martha, they're his family friends all his life. They lived in Bethany. There was a relationship, maybe it was a family relationship, but they're about his age. They're in their late twenties, early thirties, and Lazarus is sick. Maybe Lazarus was sickly, but they come from wealth. That genuine aromatic Nard that Mary uses to bathe the feet of Jesus, that's very expensive, very pricey. And they had a lot of that nard. You have wealth if you can afford that. But Jesus is their friend. When they send word to him, "the one you love is sick," what do you think their expectation is? Jesus will come right away. He doesn't. Do you think he doesn't know what their expectation is? He knows. He purposely does not do what they expect him to do. And they're his really good friends. They've seen him cure people. Won't he cure somebody who is his really good friend?

Their thinking is: why would you cure that person you don't know? But you won't cure the person you do know and do love? Now if you were Martha, if you were Mary, that's how you'd be thinking. If you sent for Jesus. (People send for me all the time, would you come, my loved one is sick? Would you anoint them?) Of course, wouldn't you drop what you were doing and go do them? That's what we do. But that's not what Jesus does. He has a purpose. He has a meaning. He doesn't reveal it to them right away. It comes later. He knows Lazarus is dying. He knows it. He knows Lazarus has died. He knows it. He stays away. It makes no sense to them. And isn't that us sometimes, before our God when we put our prayers for our loved ones in front of him and he seems silent or he seems like he doesn't respond and we have these expectations and he doesn't fulfill our expectations?

And then what? Do we go away? Do we say, well, I put my faith in you but you did not respond in the way I had a right to expect? When Jesus finally does come to Bethany, he's chastised a little, gently but chastised by Martha and Mary. "Lord, if you had been here.... But you did not do what we expected. Lord you weren't here. You think he doesn't hear that in their words? You think he doesn't pick that tone up? Of course, he does. And it moves him. He understands what he's doing. He is tackling this confrontation with the enemy in the form of death that touches every life, including the lives of his friends. And he's asking them, "Do you really have faith in me?" "Yes, of course we do. We believe you're the Messiah." "No, I mean right now do you have faith in me? Not then, but now." "Well, yes. Yes, we have come to believe that you are the Messiah." "I am the resurrection. Do you believe that?"

Do you and I believe that. Yes, Lord, we have come to believe. Jesus weeps. He weeps like they weep. He knows what he's going to do. But still he weeps. He's one of us. He gets our plight. And so the little girl had just died, the son of the widow of Nain, he had died the day before. Now he's being buried. But Lazarus is four days. What does Jesus do in the face of this? He thanks God for having heard his prayer. And then he says, "Lazarus! Come out." Lazarus comes out and he's all bound up in the burial clause, but he's not dead. He's alive. "Untie him. Let him go free."

In a recent discussion about this passage, one of the parishioners said: What's the impact like for me right here in the 21st century of this particular story? My response: What's your tomb? What's your tomb? Where have you been wrapped and buried beyond the realm of hope? Win what aspect of your life do you think: It's too late for me in this area. I'm beyond even the touch of God. There's no more hope for me. What's your tomb? Is it a particular sin into which you retreat? Can you hear Jesus call your name and say: "Come out. Come out of that tomb." Is it a particular memory that is entombing you, maybe from your youth? Is it a particular relationship of estrangement that ties you up? Can you dare to hear our Lord say; "Come out, untie her and let her go free?" What's your tomb? We all have them. And the Lord says, my power can reach into your tomb. Right in there. My word can go into your tomb and call you out of that. Place beyond hope.

What do I need for that to happen, we ask? Jesus responds: I need you to hear my word and to put your faith in it. Notice Lazarus' tomb is carved in stone, with a stone rolled in front of it. Sound familiar? In two weeks, we will hear about another tomb carved out of stone with a stone rolled in front of it. Jesus raises three people from the dead. They will all die again. When he is raised, he will not die again. That's the difference. That's what he brings. And what opens us to him is saying, "You know, Lord, I believe that you are the resurrection and the life." That is what brings us here each Sunday. That is what we celebrate at this altar table. We eat the bread of life so that we will live and never die. Live with him forever. It's the simplest of messages. People of every age need to hear it and believe it. Let us ask the Lord to help us.

May He bless us today and give us his peace.