

## Unbound, Unmasked and Free

March 21, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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*Texts: John 11: 1-5, 17-44*

If you want a little preview of some post-Covid joy, look no further than the video on the homepage of our newish website. After the overhead shot of our sanctuary, after Joanne Paul's smiling and unmasked face, and Moana Bentin's smiling yet masked face, the video turns to an action shot of our own Steve Weller, mask on at first, then with both hands he reaches back behind his ears, peels his mask off, flips it around his fingers, revealing his bushily bearded face and his own heartwarming smile! I didn't realize it at the time it was filmed or when it went live in December, but looking back at that shot now, I can only see it as a beautiful sign of things to come! Hats off to Theory One Design for capturing that masks on and masks off footage last fall at an outdoor leadership gathering.

Over this past week, I've been returning to that image of Steve and looking ahead to more of the same as we've begun to ponder plans for reopening after this very long chapter of quarantine. I've also been thinking about it in line with what happens near the end of the very long chapter of John we just heard. After raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus does something that some find almost as astonishing as perplexing, a "miracle after the miracle" as one writer has called it. He commands those gathered around to "unbind him and let him go!" I've been hearing Jesus saying this or something like it to all of us, especially as some are just now beginning to emerge from our own 6 x 6-foot encasements of isolation, as we are just now beginning to consider returning to what is sure to be a new and different life. I'll come back to this connection in a moment. First, a little context on how this story fits into John's gospel and into our Lenten journey.

And what a story it is! So many rich details! So many pithy, provocative and preachable pronouncements!

*Lord, if only you had been there!  
Your brother will rise again!  
I am the resurrection and the life!  
Lord, come and see!  
Jesus began to weep.  
Lazarus come out!  
And finally,  
Unbind him and let him go!*

I've preached on many of these, often on this fifth Sunday of Lent, yet because of the fullness of detail within the story, because the story so easily stands alone a part from the broader narrative, I've barely considered how closely connected it is with Holy Week which starts next week. Yes, the story is the seventh and last of the so-called signs or miracles in John's gospel, a climatic culmination of the power of Jesus's ministry. And yes, John's account of the death and raising of Lazarus is clearly intended to foreshadow and prepare us for the death and resurrection of Jesus. It's just never dawned on me before that the story happens just a few days before Palm Sunday and just a few miles, like 2 miles down the road, from Jerusalem at Bethany, which is today the West Bank town of Al-Eizariya, Arabic

for “the place of Lazarus.” By the end of this chapter 11, the plot to kill Jesus is well underway. And by the first half of 12, Jesus is already making his triumphal Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem, parading down the Mount of Olives from Bethany, and attracting crowds precisely because word had spread that he had raised Lazarus. Maybe if I had been raised in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, I wouldn’t have missed the temporal or geographic proximity of this story to the events of Holy Week. Did you know that Eastern Orthodox celebrate a Feast Day called Lazarus Saturday and they do so the day before Palm Sunday? Makes sense, right?

Back to that last line. Unbind him and let him go. Jesus, the man with that Messianic magic had just raised a dude from the dead. You’d think he could unbind him, too, wouldn’t ya? An extra snap of the fingers, a tug of the bandage or whatever woven cloth and a Lazarus spin? Or maybe you’d think he’d tell him ‘Lazarus, you’re alive now! Time to get yourself out of those stinkin’ clothes and put on your party dress! After all I just told you to come out!’ But no, instead he turns to the community and says to *them*: Unbind him! Let him go! “Unbind” here in the Greek can also be translated as ‘loosen’ or ‘free!’ Especially given how near we are to Jesus’s own death and resurrection, in the story and in our Lenten journeys, we’ll do well to listen up to Jesus’s instructions. For when Lazarus comes out of the tomb, Jesus very soon after goes in! If this is indeed a preview or rehearsal, it seems that Jesus is giving us a role to play not only after Lazarus’s resurrection but after his own as well!

I came across a 2014 poem by Brittany Deininger that seems particularly well suited for Lazarus Sunday, not to mention for the gorgeous, at last we can say it, spring weather we’ve been having! It’s called “Signs of Life.”

*The tulips are rising from the ground  
as if, having heard their name,  
they suddenly walked toward the sound  
of winter’s stone rolling away.  
One by one, their buds loosen and blush  
crimson, fuchsia, boysenberry.  
For the first time their unwrapped  
faces see and are seen.  
I cut one of each color  
and bring their green-stemmed mouths  
to the cup of water. Arranged  
on the windowsill they bow respectfully  
to passersby who are also coming  
out of their tombs. After resurrection  
comes the unbinding, the learning  
what it means to be free.*

Talk about a preview of some post-Covid joy! And what a fitting precursor to the Easter lilies and to hearing that big word that we “bury” for Lent, the one that starts with an “A” and ends with an “lulia”!

I want to be careful with where I go from here and how I try to bring this one home for us. Yes, this long chapter of our lives may have felt to many of us as though we have been entombed, that we ourselves have died to our old lives, that we’ve been walking zombies. The metaphor of being encased in our quarantines is almost too palpable, and yet we set that alongside the reality of over 540,000 friends,

lovers, fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers who have died, often encased behind glass walls on ICU units before they've gone to the grave or have had their ashes scattered. Mary's pleading with Jesus "Lord if only you had been there" may cut straight to the heart for many, let alone the fact that Jesus himself weeps for Lazarus. This passage has so much power for this moment! Read it this week, again and again if you can and let it speak to you, with or without my ideas about it. I can't begin to know what the inside of your proverbial tombs have been looking like, in part because I'm still in my own! But we do know, we can see, we can feel, that we are coming out of it, Amen! I mean for one thing, if nothing else, the passage reminds us to check our stinkin' clothes before we do! Yet more deeply as the poem helpfully points out, consider for the first time, as with the tulip, as with Steve in our video, our unwrapped faces will be able to see and be seen! And yet more deeply still, take this in: "After the resurrection, comes the unbinding, the learning what it means to be free!"

Jesus knows we are going to need each other to encounter a moment so profound! Here's where the invitation in this passage rings most clear. For what will it mean to be free again after all this? To be unbound? To be loosened? We have an incredible opportunity to learn and it seems clear that he wants us to learn this lesson together! The Greek word is a plural command. Jesus said to *them*: Unbind him and let him go!

Arguably, not since our nation's founding have we had such an opportunity to learn together what it means to be free, and we can now see with ever clearer eyes how that experiment has gone for better and for worse. Like almost never before, there will be a collective sense of new life emerging within and all around us and a new chance to define what that life looks like for each of us and all of us. Can we come out of our confinement, not with some shallow sense of mere individual freedom and leisure, not with some death-defying sense of our exceptionalism at the expense of entire countries who have yet to see any vaccines or even plans for vaccines, not with every person for themselves, me-or-mine first mentality? Can we come out with a commitment to unbind ourselves and each other, from whatever holds us back and constrains us from being our truest selves? Jesus couldn't be clearer in what he tells *them*: Unbind him and let him go! It's as if to say "hey we are in this together, folks, by God's power, I can call him and you all up and out of the grave, I can show him and you all new life, come Sunday, come any day of the week, but it's on you to decide what that amazing gift of freedom means and how you will take it from here.

What fears, what habits and hatreds, what protections, what ways of masking ourselves and our vulnerabilities do we need to shed? What are the ways we need to unbind and unmask ourselves and others? My fear is that we will out of habit try to go it alone, do what we can do for ourselves and loved ones and try to taste the pleasure and comfort of what we think is freedom for us even given all that we've learning about inequality? From the horrific headlines from the shootings in Georgia this week, it's on us all unmask that situation and others like it for what it is - the toxic, fetid mix of racism, sexism and violence that is within our collective system and like it or not we are all still wearing its stinkin' clothes! Can we find the courage to reach out and unbind each other, unmask each other, unbind and unmask this system that prevents new life from emerging, that prevents us from seeing each other and being seen as God sees and loves us all? Can we learn to see our newly unwrapped faces anew, to see the face of God in the face of others, to let the face of God be seen in us in all of our brokenness, no matter what we may be looking like or smelling like? Indeed, how we can learn we learn to be free, not as individuals, but with a freedom and dignity for all?

Among the plans for reopening I hope we will consider whenever it is safe (and we may have to wait awhile for this) a ritual unmasking! Not unlike our Maundy Thursday foot washing, imagine coming into this place, imagine the power not only of watching Joanne, Moana, Steve, but our youth and our children too, and maybe friends from the wider community - we can open it up wide and make it an event! Imagine having a moment of collectively unmasking each other, of revealing our in-person smiles, no doubt our tears and maybe our fears too, but imagine us doing that for each other, in stations, sitting down in a chair mask on, letting someone else remove your mask, and with it all that mask and any mask you've worn has come to mean! Imagine what could we learn together from such a sacrament! Imagine what new commitments we could make to be a community that honors and sees and celebrates our God given dignity, stripped free of the graveclothes of our hatred and fears. How miraculous does that sound? How beautiful would that smell? Like creation emerging anew, in tulips, the crimson, fuchsia, boysenberry. Returning to the poem "the tulips are rising from the ground even now"

*as if, having heard their name,  
they suddenly walked toward the sound  
of winter's stone rolling away.  
One by one, their buds loosen and blush  
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Friends, Holy Week is closer than we think and maybe, just maybe, the same can be said for the end of this long chapter of Covid. Just two weeks to go until Easter! God knows we need start thinking now about life on the other side and our parts in it. Jesus is already calling us out, if only so that he can go in and bring all creation along. Though we may need to wait for the unmasking, let the unbinding and the learning for our collective liberation begin! Amen.