

Sermon preached by Rev Rachel McDougall

St Paul's Canterbury

Lent 5A

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'Take away the stone'

A certain man was ill. So begins a story of friendship, love and loss, death and new life and the cost of giving it.

This story is a deep story. It touches on the depth of loss, the exhaustion of grief and the finality of death.

Yet within it is the also the gift of life.

Jesus comes to his friends Mary and Martha and comes to the tomb of Lazarus.

He speaks of being the resurrection and the life and goes on to reveal it as he cries out 'take away the stone.'

In this story death is very real, but so is new life and the cost of it.

Take away the stone Jesus says. The corruption and stench of 4 day old death is not the end. The tomb is not the end of Lazarus as Jesus cries out 'Lazarus come out' and he does.

Lazarus is passive the whole time. It all happens to him, the transformation is complete, it happens beyond him and around him.

Yet this is no mere miracle as this does not come easy to Jesus.

We see a very human vulnerable Jesus who is aware of what his actions will mean.

He has left his safe place to come to his friends. He is aware of what this will cost him.

He is greatly disturbed in Spirit, deeply moved to weeping – a human response.

There is grief and loss for his friend and the sharing in the grief of those who mourn for Lazarus. There is also something else at work here.

He has to dig deep in his disturbance to summon up the words to release Lazarus from the heavy stone of the enclosed tomb.

These simple words ‘take away the stone’ mark a turning point, roll the momentum forwards and seal Jesus’ own death.

To bring Lazarus back to life seals his own fate – these are the words and actions that bring his own death closer.

To be the one who says ‘I am the resurrection and the Life’ is to be the one who freely gives up his own life to God in love for all his friends.

It is to place his trust in God that he will be raised again.

The Jesus we meet in this story is one who offers new life and hope who commands that the stone and heaviness of death can be rolled away.

It says that whatever we feel trapped by; however imprisoned we can feel in death in the heaviness of grief and loss; - this is not the end.

Death faces us starkly with the reality that we are not in control of everything, that there are things beyond us.

There are many things that can constrain us.

There are so many things that are bigger than us.

Jesus himself faced these forces and says take away the stone.

He meets each of us where we are and calls us out to new life and hope.

Only God can give us this.

This story is told to remind us that Jesus' life is given for each of us that our lives might be enlivened, and we might have fullness of life.

We tell this story because it shows us how much God loves us, to leave the safe country to head into danger.

Jesus endured the limitations of living and the reality of dying to raise us up to offer us new life right now.

He gives us the hope that new life is possible, that the heavy stones of death are not all there is, that we can be loosed from what we are trapped by and experience a deeper richer quality of life here and now.

We stand here teetering at the edge of the Passion as we look to Holy Week and the centre of our faith.

Jesus invites us to walk with him to walk into the light of life.

The invitation is to trust in the one who gives us new life and hope, who offers that to us now.

Do we have the courage to step out of the tomb, to trust the new life that unfolds before us and the challenge that this presents?

We may not always see where it leads or what we need to give up to experience it.

What is true is that Jesus walks ahead of us, that Jesus is the resurrection and the life for us right now.

What keeps us going is the promise and the hope.

I wonder what can remind you of this hope, to see beyond what blocks us, what locks us in the dark.

Do you believe in the Lord of life who takes away the stone of death?

For as Amanda Gorman wrote in her poem the hill we climb:

*there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to be it.*

Lectio:
Ezekiel 37.1-14
Psalm 130
(Romans 8.6-11)
John 11.1-45