

**UNBIND THE GRAVE CLOTHES!**  
**Easter Sunday, April 8, 2012, John 11: 25-44**  
**The Church of the Covenant**

We may grieve the loss of many things. My house is selling this coming week so suddenly I am becoming nostalgic for it. Then I remember three years of praying that it will be sold, high and higher real estate taxes in Mt Lebanon, the slate roof that needs to be replaced, and the weedy garden and suddenly I am transformed. He is risen! He is risen indeed! See how easily I move from grief to Easter! Or perhaps I might complain that at the ripe old age of 57 I will be moving my things into storage and moving back home with my parents. I think that's referred to as "failure to launch". Loss of independence. Actually, I think it will be nice to spend extra time with my folks. Although, I'm thinking that the 9:30 p.m. imposed Broberg curfew will require me to leave church meetings no later than 9:00 p.m. (aw, shucks!) and there will be that list of chores for me posted on the refrigerator like when I was young. Of course, maybe they'll reinstitute my allowance. I think my last allowance was a quarter!

We may grieve the loss of many things. Our independence. Our good health. The loss of a job. A career disappointment. A world that's rapidly changing—we could grieve that certainly. Children growing up and leaving the nest. Moving into a different stage of life. A marriage that for whatever reason falls apart. Entering a time of transition- one chapter closing and another chapter opening. Retirement. Growing up. Going off to school. Losing a loved one. Losing a spouse. Losing a friend. Losing a brother. It has been said that the first half of life is all about experiencing GAIN, ah, but the second half of life is all about experiencing LOSS. And loss kicks in a whole series of feelings and emotions and reactions and sadnesses, and pain held within the human heart. Grief can hold our heart captive. It can make us not truly nor completely experience the abundant life we are to have in Jesus Christ. What loss do you bring with you today to Jesus on Easter Sunday? What grief do you bear that deadens the heart and keeps you from abundant life? *"I have come to bring you life."*, says Jesus. *"I am the resurrection and the life"*, says Jesus. You know, I have a little saying about being a minister at Easter—He is risen! Jesus is risen! But I am *tired* indeed. What would lift us up? What would put a bounce in our step? What would renew our strength as with wings of eagles? What would allow us to run and not grow weary? What would exchange loss and grief for hope and eternity in our lives today???

Consider the story from the Gospel of John we just read. It is the familiar story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. The story begins by saying: *"Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister (Mary) and Lazarus."* (John 11: 5) And so the Savior of the world did; and so the Savior of the world loves us. But Lazarus has just passed away. They had summoned Jesus but Jesus had been delayed on His Father's business and during that delay Lazarus has died. Martha went out to meet Jesus but Mary remained despondent inside. Martha confronts Jesus and says: *"Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died."* (John 11: 21) I think we need to read this with a little anger perhaps in her voice, as in, Jesus, what kept you so long? What was the delay? If you had just stopped incessantly talking to people and had been on time for once my Lazarus would still be here. Later in the story Mary finally comes forth from the house, I think depressed and sad and with barely enough energy even to come outside and greet the Master. Notice the two different ways Martha and Mary exhibit their grief—Martha with hyper-action, confrontation and perhaps anger—Mary with despondency, torpor and sadness. Same loss but a very different way of reacting in grief. And Mary makes exactly the same statement to Jesus as did her sister: *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* (John 11: 32) But now we need to hear this, not in anger or in confrontation, but in resignation and without hope. 11 verses separate the two statements and the words are exactly the same but we must hear them differently. Martha—(in anger) "LORD IF YOU HAD BEEN HERE MY BROTHER WOULD NOT HAVE DIED!" Mary (11

verses later) “lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died...” So Jesus goes to the tomb of his friend and says: *“Take away the stone.”* (v. 39) Jesus wants to take away every stone that burdens us down, that weighs us down. What is Easter but God’s power doing the impossible and rolling every impossibly heavy stone away from our life? And Jesus lifts up His eyes and prays. And when he ceased praying He called out in a loud voice: *“Lazarus, come forth!”* (John 11: 43) Come out from the place of death. Come away from the place of despondency. Come away from everything that robs you of life and keeps you from living the abundant life I have planned for you! **“Lazarus, come forth!!!!!!!!!!”** Beloved, when the Son of God calls your name you rise; when the Creator of the universe breathes the breath of life in you, you live; when the Savior calls your name you are saved; because your Redeemer liveth, so shall you; because Jesus lives, you shall live also! The power of the resurrection, the power of the Spirit, the power of life itself came upon Lazarus in that moment and he stirred from the sleep of death, and he awakened to the new life planned for him by a Sovereign God, and, as it says, *“The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth.”* (John 11: 44)

We are left at the end of the story with a strange and striking image. It is the now come-to-life Lazarus walking out of his tomb, but he is wrapped with grave clothes; he is alive but he is still wrapped for death. He walks but he cannot walk fully because he is still bound with his grave clothes; He walks but he cannot run; He lives but he cannot live fully or abundantly because he is still bound by the bands of cold death. And here is the rest of the image –Martha and Mary are just like Lazarus. They are alive but not fully alive; they are walking but their grief confines them; they have life but their loss binds them, just like grave clothes. Grief and loss is like that. We kinda live when we grieve but its not much of a life; we kinda have a semi-life when we experience loss but the truth is we are much more like the walking dead than the dead come to life and walking. Lazarus is bound by the grave clothes of death. Martha is bound by the grave clothes of loss and grief. Mary is bound by the grave clothes of loss and grief. Brother and sisters, all the walking wounded, all the walking dead, all bound by the bonds of death and loss and grief.

Jesus’ last line in the story is instructive. He says: *“Unbind him, and let him go.”* (John 11: 44) But, you know, as I think of it, isn’t he also saying the same thing to Martha and to Mary. *“Unbind, Martha, from her grief and let her go.”* *“Unbind, Mary, from her loss and let her go.”* Unbind them all from the power of loss and grief and death and let them go. Unbind them and let them live. Unbind them from the grave clothes of loss and pain and grief and let them live FOREVER!!!!!!!!!!

I admit I am feeling a little bound right now. I am still reeling and sad over the death of my friend and brother, The Reverend Randy Boyer, our beloved Associate Pastor. And I will tell you it has managed to take away some of my joy. And it has bound my spirit in a way that makes me quiet and hidden away in the house like Mary. Every now and then I get a little “testy” just like Martha. And I have come to this Easter needing the Lord to raise me from the dead feeling in my heart. I have come to this Easter needing the Lord to speak the WORD, *“Unbind him, and let him go.”* When the Lord speaks the WORD it is so; it is so in heaven and it is so here on earth.

So I remember the day of Randy’s interment; it was a graveside service that I conducted. These are always hard and feel so final; no matter what you say *“O grave where is thy victory? O death where is thy sting?”* It still feels final and over and as if the forces of death have won. O Lord, if you had really been here our loved one would not have died...So that day I’m pretty down. And you know, we pastor types are supposed to have all this God-stuff handled. You know, like Martha, we say, *“Yes, Lord, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”* (John 11: 24) We know that and believe that.

But it still doesn't take away the grave clothes constricting our heart and binding our life. So I decide after the graveside service to go get a little comfort food from the local McDonald's. You know, medicate the pain with a Big Mac and fries. "You want to supersize that?" "You betcha!" Too bad McDonalds doesn't serve gravy on their fries. And I am down and feeling bad and I indeed feel just like the walking wounded, like Lazarus alive but still bound by his grave clothes. And trust me, the Big Mac Attack does not take away the pain. So I am going out to my car and I happen to look at a license plate in the parking lot. It is a vanity plate and it says "Cochroach" spelled c-o-c-h-r-o-a-c-h, I am assuming for the name of the owner. And I remember that Randy's nickname for himself is "cockroach" because you cannot kill a cockroach and a cockroach never dies. And in that moment, as if God Himself was speaking, I realized that in that unlikely and way too coincidental moment to be mere coincidence, the Lord reminded me where Randy is, in heaven, that Randy lives, and that Randy lives because of Jesus and Easter and the power of the resurrection. Can't kill a cockroach; can't kill a Christian. Because HE lives, WE shall live also. Because Jesus lives, Randy lives also. And in that moment for me, the grave clothes were loosed just a bit, and the deadening pain of loss lessened, and I knew that Jesus had come to speak the WORD of eternal life to me that day.

**Lazarus, come forth! Lazarus, come forth! Unbind him and let him go! Unbind her and let her go! Unbind us in the name of Jesus and let us go! Unbind us Lord and we shall live.**

O Jesus **is** the resurrection, that is true. But, O Jesus **is also** the life and that is just as true. The power of the resurrection unbinds the grave clothes of loss and grief. Jesus' resurrection leads to our new life in HIM today. He is the RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE! And He has come to speak a WORD into all of our hearts to unbind us and let us go...

Jesus said: *"I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."* (John 11: 25-26) *Do you believe this???*

Randy believed this with all his heart and so we know he lives. The only question today remaining is, do **we** believe this, and do we believe that Jesus has come today to unbind us and to let us live????? Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA  
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*