

He Doesn't Like Tombs
John 11: 17-27; 38-44;
Mark 16: 1-8
Don Lincoln

Most of us don't think of Jesus as the kind of guy who had friends – he was too busy running around being Messiah. But if he was fully human – like the Creeds proclaim for us, then He had to have friends. Like, maybe some friends to hang out with on a Saturday afternoon, eat some wings and watch Galilee's version of March Madness! I mean if He really came to experience our lives he must've had friends.....

Well.....Jesus DID have friends. Mary, Martha and Lazarus in our first reading, were Jesus' friends. They had him over for dinner. He hung out with them. He stayed at their house. Jesus loved this family.¹

So one day while Jesus was out of town, his friend Lazarus became very ill. His sisters, Mary and Martha, sent word to Jesus. "He whom you love is ill." I'm sure they assumed this Savior – who had healed so many people whose names He didn't even know – this Savior would hurry back and heal his friend.

Jesus did not hurry back. The text tells us: "He tarried." He lingered. How many times did these sisters look down the road to see if Jesus was coming on the horizon – and He wasn't. Lazarus got sicker. No Jesus. Lazarus got even sicker. No Jesus. They've stopped singing, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." Lazarus dies. No Jesus. So they wrap Lazarus up, put Lazarus in the tomb and roll the stone over. STILL no Jesus.

You and I hear stories – someone facing a crisis in their life – serious illness; marriage catastrophe; job layoff potential; some impending tragedy in their life – and "**Just in the nick of time**" the Savior shows up. **Just in the nick of time** and everything turns around and all is well. I've heard those stories; I LOVE those stories; I've TOLD those stories.

But there are stories where Jesus comes just **AFTER** the nick of time **has come and gone**. Like in this story. And these are His FRIENDS.....

And we **ALL** know **THOSE** stories – some of us all too well. "Jesus – if only you had been here, my brother would not have died....."

It's a stark reminder Jesus has his own agenda. And He will not be hurried, cajoled or manipulated by **OUR** agenda.

Well...finally Jesus does go to His friends. And they take Jesus to that cold, dark cave where Lazarus lay. The text tells us when Jesus got there He was greatly disturbed. "Take away the stone," He says. "Take it away."

Martha protests. "Lord, he's been dead four days. There will be a stench." Martha is such a Presbyterian. "Lord, get real. This is death. It stinks."

That's what it's like when you and I are in the tomb. When we lose interest in life, and go to that dark place. It stinks. A relationship fails, and you pull the stone back over. Or you stand beside the fresh grave of someone you cherished and don't know how you will go on without them, and frankly, you have no interest in going on without them.

Or you drive home from the doctor with the news your health problems are way worse than you thought, and they are going to be chronic. Or you had a dream – invested everything you had in that dream – and then that dream crashed on the rocks. And you don't know if you have it in you to dream again.....

You prayed – asked Jesus to come, hurry – but what you were most afraid of happening happened. And you're disappointed in the circumstances of your life, and disappointed in the Savior. "Jesus, if only you had been here." That's when you pack up your hopes, and crawl into the tomb. And it stinks.

Notice in the story. Jesus doesn't go into Lazarus' tomb. That's what you and I would prefer when we're in the tomb.

We want Jesus to climb down into the tomb with us; to comfort us in the tomb; come into our tomb and keep us company; we want him to tell us we were right and they were wrong; or we want him to legitimize our victimization; we want him to redecorate our tomb.

Jesus doesn't like tombs. He didn't spend much time in His own. He doesn't want to come into yours. He has no interest in sanctifying what stinks. Any more than He was going to hurry to meet your agenda or my agenda.....or even the agenda of His friends.

Because Jesus' agenda was not to run from cemetery to cemetery, resuscitating the dead. He knew Lazarus would get ill again; and do the dying thing all over. That was not Jesus' agenda.

Jesus' agenda was to defeat death for all time. And nothing could deter Him from that – even friendships. His agenda was to free you and me from the binding grave-clothes that suffocate us – the illnesses, the disappointments, the broken dreams, the unfulfilled promises – all the things that STINK in this world, by taking all of them to the grave with Him and burying them forever in defeat. Proving that none of those things of this world have the last word.

Our job – and our privilege – is to keep coming out of every dark place into the light and life – because you and I know the second story we heard today. “He has been raised. He is not here.”

Friends, our calling, sent out into the world this day, is to tell that story to anyone in any tomb – “Come out of that place where it stinks. Because it does not have the power to hold you. It cannot claim the last word. Come out – be unbound – come back to life. Live into the holy and sacred dreams worthy of your fleeting years.”

Christ is Risen. He is Risen Indeed!

Amen.

1. The direction and a good bit of the language of this sermon was inspired by a message delivered by Craig Barnes, President of Princeton Theological Seminary at a meeting of the Board of Trustees of Princeton Seminary.