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Summer of Love: Unbound  
 John 11:1-43

A month and a half ago, the world was transfixed by the tale of the 12 young soccer players and their coach trapped in a cave in Thailand. On a hike after practice, the boys were exploring when floodwaters forced them deep into one of the most dangerous cave systems in the world. They were trapped for 10 days before rescuers found them. It took another week to guide them to safety.<sup>1</sup>

It was pitch dark in the cave, and cold. They had no food, and survived by licking water off the walls. The coach had spent years as a Buddhist monk, and he taught them to meditate to pass the time and stay calm as the air grew stale around them. As they waited, deep underground, a team of 10,000 people: divers, soldiers, and spelunking experts from all over the world, worked around the clock first to find the boys, then to hatch a plan to get them out through the flooded, narrow passageways.

Trapped in the cave, the boys were facing certain death. When each, one by one, eventually came out of the cave into the daylight, it seemed like a miracle. It was as if they were reborn, given a second chance at life.

People often return from near death experiences determined to live differently – to spend less time working and more time with family, to love more fully, to be more kind to children and animals, to take more risks and worry less about what other people think. Life is so fragile! Our connection to this world can be so tenuous! If only Mary Oliver could ask each of us each morning, what are you going to do with your one wild and precious life?! so we could remember.

I wonder what it was like for Lazarus to come back: did he live any differently? Because he was more than just near-death. Lazarus was dead, four days dead: undeniably, definitely, dead. I picked this passage for our summer of love series because it can teach us a lot about love. Though Jesus was fully God, he was also fully human – a man who loved his friends, who cried tears of grief and shouted with anger at the reality of death. To love is to be vulnerable, to risk the pain of loss. Jesus understands this – he lived it.

Mary and Martha were aggrieved and angry when Christ arrived, too late to save Lazarus. Then, the sisters were amazed, and probably also a little bit terrified to see their brother brought back to life after four days in the tomb. But there he was – called back to life by Jesus. Lazarus wasn't the only one who got a second chance at life in this story - Mary and Martha did, too. Women didn't have many ways to make a living in those days; they

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<sup>1</sup> Beech, Hannah, Richard Paddock, and Muktita Suhartono, "I Still Can't Believe It Worked: The Story of the Thailand Cave Rescue," July 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/12/world/asia/thailand-cave-rescue-seals.html>

relied on male family members. Their brother's death likely would have left Mary and Martha destitute. By saving Lazarus, Jesus saves the sisters, too, from losing everything they had.

But, by saving Lazarus, Jesus seals his own fate.

In the gospel of John, the chief priest and his cronies use this miracle to justify the crucifixion. Jesus' ministry and popularity among the people is too risky- it's drawing too much attention from the political authorities, and could mean a crackdown on all Judeans. So Caiaphas argues – better for one man to die than the whole nation suffer. Jesus saves Lazarus, and only to be marked for execution himself.

That's a lot of pressure on poor Lazarus. Do you think he took advantage of his second chance at life, knowing that Jesus had been condemned for saving him? Lazarus didn't ask Jesus to save him – that was Mary and Martha's doing. In fact, Lazarus doesn't say anything at all – he is dead and then he is alive again, but still bound up in his stinking graveclothes, surrounded by an astonished group of mourners. He is a passive participant in this drama of resurrection and salvation, as we all are, until we choose to respond.

One of the most remarkable parts of the story of the lost soccer players in Thailand came later – after the media frenzy died down a bit, after the boys were whisked to a hospital to heal and recover, after they were reunited with their families. A couple of weeks after the rescue, most of the boys went to a Buddhist temple to be initiated as novice monks. They stayed at the temple the same amount of time they spent underground, as a way to give thanks for their rescue and to honor the retired Navy Seal who died trying to get them out. That's amazing to me. They responded to the world's outpouring of love and support and goodwill by dedicating themselves to their religious practice.

When you think about it, our whole life of faith is chance after chance to live differently after receiving the life-giving love of God in Jesus. To live and love more fully, since we were once lost and now are found.

I've been lost before, spent 8 hours wandering on Greybeard Mountain outside of Montreat as a kid, and let me tell you- it was scary. I've never had a near-death experience. But I still can relate to Lazarus. I wonder if you can, too. Because we encounter death all of the time. We are wrapped up and trapped by sin – we are bound by our own mortality. Bound to die, and bound to mourn those whom we love.

Bound to hear death tolls shouted by the news headlines – the latest, the Saudi airstrike with an American-made bomb that hit a schoolbus, killing 51 people, 40 of them children. We are bound by our own complicity. We are bound by the belief that violence will resolve problems instead of causing them.

Everywhere I turn, my shoes get stuck in the muck of mortality.

I mean, did you read the news this week? Bound to be touched in some way by the evils of abuse and the pain of addiction, thinking of the report of the grand jury in Pennsylvania and the massive overdoses in New Haven.

The muck isn't just out there, though, it's in here, too – it's of my own making: I'm bound by the voice inside that says I'm not good enough.

Bound by fear and insecurity.

Bound by my desire for more stuff, even though I have committed to live more simply.

Bound by the systems of oppression I participate in and benefit from as a white American woman and do not do enough to dismantle or change.

We can relate to Lazarus because ever since Eve stood in the garden – and bit the apple, crisp and sweet – we have been shackled by the powers of sin and death, separated from God and one another. Too often we are trapped in tombs of our own making, wrapped up in the graveclothes of sin, doubt, and deception that drag us down, and keep us from the fullness of life that God intends for us. We are imperfect people, living in a broken world. It's why we want and need an infinite number of second chances. Yes, we can identify with Lazarus.

How do we loosen the bonds of sin that hold us so tightly? How do we find our way out of the tomb? I think we need each other for that. We can't do it on our own.

Jesus' words brought Lazarus out of the tomb, giving him the chance to live a new life. But after four days in the dark, dank, underbelly of death, he needed help to find his way back to life. So Jesus says to the crowd of mourners gathered at the tomb – Unbind him! Set him free!

The crowd couldn't have been more shocked. They were not prepared for this miracle. Not even the disciples were expecting to see Lazarus alive again, and they had been following Jesus for a long time. Not even Mary and Martha knew to expect this, and they had just confessed their faith in Jesus as the Messiah! Jesus had just told them that he is the resurrection and the life! But it seems that they, like us, had a hard time understanding what that means.

Lucky for Lazarus, they didn't need to understand. God was able to act through Jesus without their understanding. God's life-giving power does not depend on our belief. Thanks be to God.

We cannot move from death to life by ourselves. We need God, and we need each other – we need holy power present in community to bring new life. Lazarus needs the hands of his friends and family to help unwrap the linens that held him in the tomb. We need each other to witness the Spirit at work and to pitch in. We need each other to help unwrap the trappings of sin that bind us.

Because we've all been lost. We've all struggled to find our way out of the dark and into the light. We've all needed a life-giving, resurrecting word from a beloved friend. At

some point or another, we've all needed a team of divers to help guide us from a place where we are lonely, and hungry, and scared into a place where we are cared for, healthy, and strong again. To help us find our way – whether it is out of a cave of grief, or a well of depression, or a storm of self-doubt, or the isolation of the closet...what would it look like if we followed Christ's lead? If we worked together to help liberate one another from the stinking bonds of sin and death that bind us? If we worked together to guide each other out of the stifling, scary, and dark places of our lives, and into the life-giving light?

To me, this unbinding is the work of Christian discipleship. Unbinding is offering and receiving forgiveness. Unbinding is meeting people where they are, and loving them for who they are, no matter what. It is being open to receive and share the grace of God. It is helping guide one another from death to new life again and again. Unbinding is the ministry to which we are called. What wonderful and amazing things might happen in this place, in us, if we offer our hands to do the work of unbinding, to set each other free?!