

The Landscape of Lent: Cave

(Catherine Williams preached this sermon at Princeton United Methodist Church on Sunday, April 6, 2014.)

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Up to this point in the story the gospel writer has given us some intriguing details. We've also met the entire cast of characters, which include Martha the eldest sister and responsible household manager, Mary, whom we might call the free-spirited feminist, devoted to Jesus and his teachings. There's Jesus, the rabbi whose words and actions make strange claims to divinity. We've also met groups of people such as the continually befuddled disciples, and the dutiful mourners and friends gathered at the home of this well-to-do family. Oh and yes, there's Lazarus, who - for all the stage time he gets - is practically invisible. Up to now, he contributes to the narrative by either dying or being dead.

But, if we were to enter the story in Lazarus' role what details might take on greater significance? Imagine for a few moments that you are Lazarus, a close friend of Jesus. It is common knowledge around town that you and your sisters are like family to the Rabbi - really, you're that close! You've witnessed and heard repeated accounts of the amazing power Jesus has

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displayed in signs and wonders that have surprised you into awe-filled regard for this man as a healer. You and your sisters have actually discussed among yourselves that this may be the Messiah your people have been awaiting for so many centuries. Then, you begin feeling ill, and keep getting worse. Your sisters send word to him of your condition. You know beyond doubt that he will be here soon; and if anyone can cure you, Jesus can.

You take to your fevered bed that night in hope. You rise next morning feeling frighteningly worse than last night, and you ask for news of Jesus. No one has heard...and so you wait. Aches, pains, fevers, chills become consumed in a delirium as you slip in and out of consciousness. An eerie darkness is beginning to close in around you. Where is he? Martha mops your brow and whispers calming words, "He'll be here soon Lazarus. You know how much he loves you, he'll be here soon." Now the sun has begun to set; Jesus is still not here. By now you feel yourself enveloped in a thick, dark cloud of disappointment, anger, fear, and abandonment. You wonder if this is what death feels like...

By morning Lazarus' body has no signs of life and the family's worst fears have been realized. Not only is Lazarus dead. Jesus is not there, and there's no word explaining his mysterious absence. They bury Lazarus in the

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family tomb - a space hewn out of a rock, quite similar to the one Jesus would be buried in just a couple of weeks later. Lazarus's body is laid out flat on a ledge behind that stone covering the entrance to the cave.

Burial caves said then, as graves do now, "here ends the life of our dear departed such and such." But most often, the march of life doesn't simply end with one dramatic halt, does it? Along the journey, from the moment we are born, there are, what theologian, Gordon Lathrop calls, the 'little deaths' we face in the course of living. Lathrop speaks of "moments of physical sickness or disability, or the moments of letting go, of moving on, or of facing failure, all of which can be described in metaphoric language as having something of death about them."¹ To Lathrop's listing I could add, strained or severed relationships with living persons, mental and emotional pathologies, loss of employment or underemployment, loneliness, betrayal, and a host of other little deaths that begin to close in around us, cutting off our hope, our connections, even our faith, and leaving us entombed by circumstances beyond our control.

Such is the perspective from *inside* the cave. If we imagine he could feel, which of us would blame Lazarus for feeling abandoned and alone in that

¹ Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Pastor: A Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 129.

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dark, dismal place. Which of us in our own metaphorical burial spaces don't feel disoriented and fearful, shrouded by a sense of meaninglessness, where even our prayers bounce off the walls in a hollow echo? Day one, day two, day three all pass with no help or relief, and by day four it stinks, *for real*.

I remember one particular personal cave experience. It lasted for the better part of eight months as I sank into what had to be the ultimate bottomless pit of fear – a dark, cold, and deathly isolating space. But somewhere on my way down, (frankly, it was long after I had ceased to care anything about faith or hope, or God, even) I discovered what the Psalmist meant when he asked “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?...If I make my bed in hell, you are there...If I say surely the darkness shall cover me, and the *light* around me become *night*, **even the darkness is not dark to you.**” (Psalm 139:7-12a)

The Psalmist seems to have understood that God has the right and the power to redefine our realities, and to ruffle our tidy existential categories. God, the one who created day and night, is best at determining what exactly is **light** and what is **darkness**; is best at determining what exactly is **life** and what is **death**; can say mind-boggling things like “those who believe in me, even though they die will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will

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never die.” Our inability to comprehend that kind of God talk, or see our situation from that kind of divine perspective, doesn’t make it any less potent.

I probably cannot (nor should I even try to) accurately name your ‘little death’ or your cave. Only you truly know what that is like. And yet, there is a word from the Lord through this Scripture today for whoever has ears to hear, and it is this: **the cave does not have the final word.** For the Christian believer, the cave is not the final chapter. No matter whether we feel like it’s day one, week two, year three, even it feels like *forever*, the cave - that circumstance that entombs us, that nightmare that overwhelms us, that crisis trying to strangle us – it does not have the final word.

Lazarus, whose name means *God is my help*, had no idea where, or how close, his help was. He only knew he was trapped in circumstances utterly beyond his control, and could see no way out. Which means that for the person in the cave, all I’ve said until now may mean absolutely nothing. But the fact that you are here in this gathered community of faith is symbolic of something hopeful. It symbolizes that you are part of a wider community that cares, and that believes the *life* of God has the power to destroy *death*, and that the *light* of Christ cannot be overpowered by *darkness*.

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In a few moments we will commemorate the last meal Jesus had with his friends; friends he leaned on so heavily in his final moments just before his own earthly cave. In this act of remembrance today, may those of us outside the caves of our sisters and brothers be empowered anew to be life-bringers and light-bearers. May *our* faith in the presence and power of Christ be a source of strength to our struggling loved ones. May our wordless presence with them exude the Christian confidence that nothing - no death, no life, no situation, no person, no crisis, no cave, - nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. May those of us feeling trapped in one cave or another sense the strength of the community around us as we pray, *Even so, come Lord Jesus, Amen.*