

SEQUOYAH HILLS  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**“Signs and Wonders: Unbound”**

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*<sup>31</sup> The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. <sup>32</sup> When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” <sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup> He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” <sup>35</sup> Jesus began to weep. <sup>36</sup> So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” <sup>37</sup> But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”*

*<sup>38</sup> Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. <sup>39</sup> Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” <sup>40</sup> Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” <sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup> I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” <sup>43</sup> When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” <sup>44</sup> The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”*

*<sup>45</sup> Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.*

**John 11:31-45**

This is the last of Jesus’s signs, or at least what is most commonly identified as the last of Jesus’s seven signs in the Gospel of John. If you’ve been with us, Christ’s signs, Christ’s miracles in John’s Gospel have been our focus for the past six weeks, starting at a wedding in Cana, back and forth to Jerusalem, at times on the road, at times in the wilderness, at times in a town, at times in a city, John tells us of these signs not just to show us what amazing things Jesus did. They were done so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that we may have life in his name.

Short word about what we’ll start next week. Next Sunday begins the season of Advent, a time of renewed preparation for the coming of our Lord, in anticipation of Christmas, when Christ was born. As Christians, when we go to the Old Testament, we hear those pages again and again anticipating Christ’s coming, albeit in an unexpected way. That’s true in particular for a passage of prophecy commonly read at Christmas, Isaiah chapter 9, in which the coming of a child is

heralded as a point of deliverance for the people of God, and that child shall be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Kind of strange names to give a baby. Why would we say this is talking about Jesus? We’ll explore why in the four weeks of Advent.

But this week, as we close this series on the miracles of Jesus, we see a sign in the face of death, a life unbound, and belief stemming from it. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

There wasn’t any need for Mary to be in a hurry. Her brother was already dead. Mary is on the move, rushing out the door on her way to see Jesus, when we come into this story, but in a lot of ways, the suspense is already gone. There’s no ticking clock to see if Jesus could get there in time. Her brother was already dead.

That’s not to say Jesus couldn’t have gotten there in time. It seems that he could have, but he didn’t.

A few days earlier, Mary’s brother Lazarus had gotten very sick. Mary, Lazarus, and their sister Martha all lived in a small village outside Jerusalem called Bethany. At some point they had befriended this man Jesus, presumably as Jesus was passing through—that’s how Luke tells it anyway; this chapter is the first time John mentions Mary or Martha or Lazarus, even though it’s clear they were all close. But they knew him to be a healer, so when Lazarus got sick, the sisters sent word to Jesus that their brother was very ill.

Jesus at the time really wasn’t that far away. Since he had healed the man blind from birth, which is what Steve preached on last week, he had largely stayed in Jerusalem. But when a group of religious leaders tried to arrest him, he left the city and went across the Jordan River. Certainly not close, but not too far away. Probably about twenty miles. Point is, if Jesus was in a hurry, he could make it back in a day. But when he got the news about Lazarus, he didn’t go anywhere. He stayed out there two more days.

At some point over that span, while Jesus stayed out in the wilderness, Lazarus dies. Mary and Martha lose their brother, and people came to console them. Just not Jesus. A day late and a dollar short, as it were.

Still, she’s in a hurry. She had been in her home, surrounded by folks who had come to console her and her sister Martha, but a little while earlier her sister had left because she heard Jesus was coming. Why Martha left and not Mary we can’t say. Maybe Mary was simply too overcome. Maybe Mary felt that she needed to greet those who had come to offer their sympathies. Or maybe Jesus was the last person she wanted to see. After all, they had sent for him, and he didn’t come.

For whatever reason, only Martha goes out. She had spoken with Jesus. To her Jesus had said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” And she had confessed her faith that this was true. Then she came back. She came back home, pulled her sister aside, told her that Jesus wanted to see her.

At that, Mary left like a shot. Why she left this time, who's to say? Maybe she just needed the invitation. Maybe she just needed to get out of the house. Or maybe, if Jesus had earlier been the last person she wanted to see, but now he had the nerve to send for her, when he didn't seem to think it was all that important when she sent for him, maybe she goes out this time to give him a piece of her mind.

She rushes out. Everyone else follows her in fact. When she sees him, she kneels at his feet, still a sign of respect I suppose—they did know him as Rabbi, after all. But I can only imagine through tears, through rage, through confusion, she says through clenched teeth, “Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

It's the same thought her sister had had when she saw him. It's the same question some who had followed her there had on their mind. It's the same question any one of us would have if we were in her place. It's the same question so many of us would have when we face the pain and grief of loss. “God, you could have done something, anything, to stop this, to prevent this, to bring about some other end to this story. Why didn't you?”

How many of us have that very question right now? No shortage of reasons why these days. “God, you could have done something, anything, to stop this, to prevent this. Why didn't you? Where were you?” How many of us are even in worship this morning much like Mary knelt before Jesus: still angry, still distraught, still confused?

It's a natural thing to feel, and a natural thing to ask, because there are times when we look at the state of things and wonder: if all this is happening, what does this tell us about God? We've been talking this whole time about signs and wonders and what they say about God. What about all the times there could've been some sign, some wonder, some miracle, but it doesn't happen. What does that say about God? That he doesn't know? That he doesn't care? That he would do something but can't? That he could do something but won't?

Eh, what difference does it make anyway? The damage is already done. No doubt that's the thought that crossed Martha's mind. What difference would it make? What would it matter what Jesus would do? Sure, he's a healer, but we're past that now. Her brother was already dead. The whole thing is beyond help. Why even bother now?

That's pretty much what she told Jesus when he came to the tomb holding Lazarus's body. Why bother? “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days,” she says.

But something about Jesus seems different. While she had assumed that he just didn't care that much, being that he waited two days after learning her brother was sick, something seemed different. When he spoke with her sister Mary, he became troubled, moved, weeping, some might say out of grief, others might say out of anger, but it was definitely different. He got that way again, disturbed, when he came to the tomb. Maybe he was in denial, she might have thought, or maybe the grief had finally registered with him that troubled him so deeply all of a sudden, but when she heard him say, “Take away the stone,” that was too much. The damage had been done, and she couldn't live through putting her brother away in a tomb a second time.

But then Jesus said a puzzling thing: “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” The glory of God? Where is the glory of God in all of this? Or at least that’s what I would’ve thought if I were in Martha and Mary’s place.

Then Jesus looks up, offers thanks to God, and then cries out into the tomb, “Lazarus, come out!” The way John puts what happens next captures the surprise and impossibility of what was seen there at the tomb. “The dead man came out,” v. 44 says. “The dead man came out.” It doesn’t even compute to say that. He couldn’t even walk freely because he was still wrapped in cloth, so Jesus said, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

It had to have been surreal for them, for Mary, Martha, and the other people there. To see this dead man come out of the tomb was astonishing enough, but then to be called to go up to him for the all too practical purpose of removing strips of cloth so his hands and feet could be free. And I wonder as Mary and Martha and the people there removed the strips of cloth from Lazarus so that he could walk, whether something was being unbound for them as well.

We’ve spent these past six weeks talking about Christ’s signs and what they say about him. Each week there’s been something that defies or subverts expectations, whether it’s helping a couple save face at a wedding, healing an official’s son from fifteen miles away, feeding a crowd with just a bit of bread and fish, or healing a man blind from birth. But all of them have told us something about Jesus. That’s the purpose of these signs: to point to Christ, to say something about him.

So what could be said here? That Jesus can call the dead out of the tomb? Well, yes, I guess that’s the obvious part. Based on how he operated earlier, the assumption I suppose had been that Jesus could heal someone, bring them back from the brink of death. He could do so if it was an immediate illness. He could do so if it was a lifelong illness. He could do so in person. He could do so from far away. But the assumption was that there was a limit: that the person had to still be alive. Now, though, that limit is gone, and what this says about Jesus is that not even death puts someone beyond his reach to save.

But I think there’s something even deeper going on. It’s not just that Jesus brings a dead man back to life. It’s that others are called to believe that it can happen. There’s a reason John spends so much time talking about Mary and Martha and how they send for Jesus and how they respond to Jesus when he gets there late. All options had been exhausted. Their brother was already dead. But talk to them after Lazarus comes out of the tomb, and think about how differently, how fundamentally differently they understood the world then.

Now it’s a world in which there is no instance of something beyond hope, no matter that is beyond the reach of Christ to save. And though death, and with it frailty, with it illness, with it hardship, with it all the limits and pain in this life, in all its inescapability, may not be the final word after all.

Something changes when we see that, when you believe that. Something is unbound.

There is no greater sign and testament to the glory of God than a life unbound in his Son. What binds you?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.