

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

**ALWAYS FREE**  
*Sermon for Lent 5B—Jn 11:1-45*  
LPC, 4/6/14

Several years ago, when I was still working at my prior church in the Washington suburbs, but just having accepted the call to come to Lawrencefield, I attended a conference for spiritual directors at a retreat center in rural Maryland. There were people there from all over the country. One of the exercises was to pair off and spiritually direct each other after a guided meditation. My partner was a Methodist minister from Logan County, West Virginia. She knew I was going to Wheeling, but was still growing into the idea. She pulled a popular spiritual directors' trick, which is to ask for one word to describe one's spiritual state. I said, "Free." She grinned and said, "You know what West Virginia's motto is? 'Mountaineers are always free.'" I took this as confirmation that I was on the right track in accepting this call.

Freedom! What a wonderful, terrifying, amazing, beautiful concept! We Americans take our freedom very seriously. We know we are blessed to have the freedoms we enjoy, and, historically, as a nation we have been willing to lay down our lives for freedom. Freedom is a very high value for Americans.

Freedom is also a very high value for Christians. When we speak of freedom in Christ we mean something slightly different from the physical and civil freedoms guaranteed for us by the US Constitution. Whereas as constitutional freedoms are guaranteed to us from birth, our spiritual freedom is often something we have to grow into.

However, just like constitutional freedom, spiritual freedom involves both "freedom from" and "freedom to." Spiritual freedom is freedom *from* things like sin, guilt, prejudice, doubt, hatred, fear, destructive habits, addiction, selfishness, and vice. Spiritual freedom is also freedom *to* know and love God, to enter in honest and fulfilling relationships with God and with others, to participate in the kingdom of heaven, to experience eternity.

Remember what I have said previously about eternity? In the Christian setting, eternity is not merely lasting forever; eternity is freedom from temporal limits. The freer we followers of Jesus are in Christ, the more we experience eternal life in *this* life.

Now as mortal creatures, there are some limits to which we will be subject as long as we live in this world. We are corporal beings and so cannot in this life be free of our temporal bodies, which are subject to injury, weakness, and age. We will also never be completely free of grief, as our temporal bodies and the temporal bodies of those we love are subject to pain and death.

However, as Christians, we look forward to the consummation of our freedom at some point known only to God, when we are free even from grief and from the limitations of earthly bodies.

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Why all this talk about freedom? The Gospel story is about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. The Old Testament lesson is about dry bones living again.

I am conflating the concepts of freedom and resurrection because of what has been our Lenten theme this year: healing unhappiness.

I put it to you that unhappiness is caused by lack of freedom. Specifically, spiritual unhappiness is caused by lack of spiritual freedom. To escape unhappiness, one has to find freedom.

I suggest that in reading and reflecting on the new life offered by Jesus, we do the following exercise: substitute the word “freedom” for the word “life.” In this way, we can shift from idea of resurrection as something that happens after we die, to something we live into now. The eternal life offered by Jesus is in fact eternal freedom, and it begins now.

I suggested to you last week that a simple observation of the world indicates that God is doing something in the world other than simply rewarding the good and punishing the wicked. I suggested that Jesus healed the blind man not just out of compassion but to heal everyone of a simplistic idea of God.

Likewise, in today’s story, although it is clear that Jesus is motivated partly by compassion (that “Jesus wept” verse), compassion is not the only reason Lazarus is raised. Lazarus is raised to heal everyone of the idea that death is the last word.

Jesus’ raising of Lazarus shows that life does not end in death. Of course! Life does not end in death because freedom does not end in death. As a matter of fact, freedom comes to full flower in death. We do experience freedom in this life the more we follow Jesus. Therefore our participation in eternal life begins now.

Our task, in Lent and always, is to be alert to what is impeding our spiritual freedom. I mentioned some of these earlier: sin, guilt, prejudice, doubt, hatred, fear, destructive habits, addiction, selfishness, and vice. God wants us to surrender these things to Godself, who is more than happy to dispose of them for us so we can be free.

Obviously, our task is also to be alert to what affirms and expands our spiritual freedom. I mentioned some of these earlier too: knowing and loving God, entering into honest relationships. I will now add serving others, supporting their spiritual freedom. These are also ways to expand and affirm our own freedom.

Remember, mountaineers are always free.

Followers of Jesus are always free.

Be free. Live.