

This week has been a sad one for me. Trinity Lutheran Seminary, my alma mater, has merged with Capital University and, in the process, almost all who have been employed by the seminary will be losing their jobs.

Trinity Seminary is dear to my heart and now, many of the professors with whom I studied are seeking calls to congregations or other teaching positions. Many of the support staff are now going to be seeking other positions as well. While I cannot say the merger is necessarily a bad thing, I can say I, along with my classmates and probably all who attended Trinity, are grieving the loss of what was and will no longer be.

I am quite sure all of us gathered here today have experienced some form of loss. Whether we have experienced the worst loss imaginable – the loss of loved ones – or, loss that comes with experiences like the end of a marriage, chronic illness, downsizing of a business, broken relationships with family or friends, broken dreams, or the ending of a seminary's existence as we know it to have been, the experience of loss makes the future seem bare. Through these experiences, we find and feel as though we can no longer do what we used to do and our world is forever changed. So, today, I need to hear our reading from John's gospel, a reading that tells us the road to Easter runs through a cemetery.

In today's reading from the gospel of John, we are given a story of great loss and, yes, we find that our road to Easter runs through a cemetery. Today, we are reminded that what appears to be an ending can in fact be a beginning – where we only see death, actually we can see the power of life; where we only see failure, God can open a new door; where we feel abandoned, God draws near and we find hope and assurance. As we travel this road to Easter, even though we travel through the reality of loss and reversals, defeats and disappointments, we know there is a power in this world that is stronger than death, even stronger than our fear of death and our experience of loss. Today's Gospel tells us of the One who will finally and ultimately have the last word.

Lazarus, Jesus' close friend, has died. Mary and Martha knew their brother, Lazarus, would not have died had Jesus been present. Today, we find Mary using the "if only" phrase as she kneels at Jesus feet saying, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And, as we see Jesus respond to Mary's weeping, we are confronted with the harsh truth of the situation. It is here in this moment that we discover the darkness of death, this moment that seemingly renders God's Word silent as Jesus himself weeps. But, it is in this moment that we also discover the incarnate God who weeps **with** us as Jesus reveals the passion and love

of a powerless yet seemingly almighty God. In this moment, Jesus reveals one of the most important characteristics we can ever learn about the heart of God: "Jesus weeps." When Jesus experienced Mary and Martha weeping for their dead brother Lazarus, John writes that he was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled." The God whom Christians worship is not a remote, aloof "sky god" somewhere out there. No, he's a tender God who is deeply moved, even grieved, by anything and everything that threatens our human well-being. In this moment, we discover Immanuel, God **with** us.

But, the story does not end there. Jesus commands them to take away the stone blocking the entrance to the tomb. Now, there is nothing pretty about death. In our efforts to deny death, we try to dress it up with cosmetology and satin lined caskets. But, no matter how ethereal we try to make things look, death is decay, rotting and yes, stench. Jewish burial rites did not include embalming as we do today. Oils and spices applied to a dead body would have held unpleasant odors at bay for a while, but after four days the stench of decay would have been overpowering. And, so it was with Lazarus. Martha becomes the realist as she says, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." However, Jesus responds by saying, "Take away the stone," and with those words we cannot help but be reminded of Jesus' coming resurrection.

When Jesus cries out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” he heralds a stunning new possibility as the stench of death meets the **fragrance** of the resurrecting power of God’s Son. It is very interesting that the Greek verb used for *come out* occurs only eight times in the whole Greek Bible, six of which are in John’s gospel. And, it is used **four** times for the shout of the crowd that cries out to crucify Jesus. While the crowd’s shouts will bring death to Jesus, Jesus’ shout brings **life** to Lazarus! Lazarus, the dead man, emerges from his tomb, bound from head to foot in burial wrappings. Jesus then commands that these burial wrappings, the last remnants of death, be removed as he says, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

When Jesus calls to Lazarus with a loud voice saying, “Lazarus, come out!” we reach an important turn in the road as we travel toward Easter. Those who had gathered around that grave, witnessed the power of God to give life, and many believed. And, **we** again witness the power of God to give life.

The truth about our lives is that we are bound by death in multiple ways, and **we** are again called to life by Jesus who is the Light and the Life of the world. In our lives, Jesus stands at the edge of **our** tomb, the many tombs in which we exist as we shrink from being fully alive. Can the stones

be rolled away? Can we come forth? Jesus stands shouting, calling us by name and saying, “Come out!” He calls us to come out and walk into the light of day. As we continue our journey to the cross and to Easter, today’s gospel reading gives us the courage to be honest about the multiple ways death and fear have a hold on us. We gain the courage to not let grief and the fear of death distort our lives, but face it and figure out ways to integrate it into our lives. As we do this, we walk placing our faith in the God who weeps with us, the God who has promised us that death does not have the last word. And, knowing that death is not the last word, we are **free to live**. We can stare death in the face and even embrace its reality as a part of earthly living – even in our grief, and even in our pain.

Yes, the road to Easter does take us through the cemetery. Even though we travel through the reality of loss and reversals, defeats and disappointments, and even death, none of these things have the last word. **Everything** that **entombs us** in multiple ways will **not** have the last word. In fact, we **ourselves** do not have the last word. **God alone has the last word**. God has rolled away the stone that blocks our lives and seals us off from life itself. Jesus’ life-giving command to, “Come out!” is a call to each one of us! Come forth and live into a life of love, a life of hope and a life of grace.