

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Year A, 2026

Ez 37:12-14

Rom 8:8-11

Ps 130

Jn 11:1-45

Unbind him

When I was a boy in the mid-1980s, there was only one television in the house, in the living room, and there were certainly no screen devices at that time. But, I had a radio-cassette recorder that I would listen to at night. It fit right between my mattress and the headboard of my bed. I could put my pillow over it, and, with the volume so low that even my brother in his bed just a few feet away could not hear, I could listen to the radio until I fell asleep. I would slowly scan the channels, working the dial, exploring, discovering, listening.

Sometimes I'd wander onto one of the Christian radio stations, where I could catch a radio drama produced by the Pacific Garden Mission in downtown Chicago, Illinois: a real, old-fashioned radio drama, with all its overly dramatic organ music and over-the-top sound effects. Along with the voice actors, there was a narrator who framed the story and provided commentary along the way.

The program featured dramatized true stories of people whose lives were turned around – from sin, homelessness, addiction, estrangement, illness, tragedy, greed, sorrow, loss, and all the rest – through an encounter with Christ, to whom they would finally surrender their lives, as they admitted their weakness and helplessness. By God's grace, they were given a new chance to live. These half-hour-long stories demonstrated the power and goodness

of God, the hope of salvation. The program, which can still be heard today, is called “Unshackled.” A shackle is a fetter, a restraint, something that holds bound. To unshackle is to unchain, unleash, release, set free.

I thought of “Unshackled” this past week while reading over the scripture readings for this Sunday. On this, the fifth Sunday of Lent, the Sunday before Palm Sunday, we are reminded of how we will triumph over death, how God will deliver us from death. In the first reading from the prophet Ezekiel: *“O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them ... then you shall know that I am the Lord.”* From Paul’s letter to the Romans: *“the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit dwelling in you.”* And from the Gospel of John: *“‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, bound hand and foot with burial bands, and his face was wrapped in a cloth. So Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him and let him go.’”*

Unbind him and let him go. Those were the words that drew me back to my childhood memories of “Unshackled.”

Sure, on the literal level, Jesus is referring to the burial bands and cloths in which Lazarus was bound when he died. According to the text, Jesus is speaking to those gathered around. He commands them, friends and family, to untie Lazarus, to release him. But beyond the literal level, symbolically, spiritually, we can interpret Jesus’s words, *“unbind him and let him go,”* as being spoken to death itself. We again call to mind the words of God spoken through

Ezekiel: *“I will open your graves and have you rise from them ... I will put my spirit in you that you may live.”*

Unbind him and let him go. What power in those words!

Anyone who prays with the scriptures regularly will start thinking, “Ah, I’ve heard this before.” Yes, in Exodus 5:1, where God speaks through Moses, commanding Pharaoh: *“Let my people go.”* Yes, in Psalm 146:7-8, *“The Lord sets prisoners free ... raises up those who are bowed down.”* Yes, in Isaiah 49:9, where the Lord sends his Servant *“To say to the prisoners: Come out! To those in darkness: Show yourselves!”* Release to prisoners. Freedom to captives. Good news to the afflicted. Comfort to the sorrowful.

Unbind him and let him go. This is a theme that echoes throughout all of scripture, God constantly and consistently showing himself as deliverer, as one who sets free from every harm and evil and finally from death itself.

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The raising of Lazarus shows us that God does not stand at a distance watching us suffer, but rather approaches us in our suffering and grief, weeps even, just as Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. God made us for life, breathed life into us, and refuses to let death have the final word. In the book of Wisdom, it is stated directly and simply: *“God did not make death, nor does he rejoice in the destruction of the living. For he fashioned all things that they may have being”* (1:13-14a).

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Jesus's intimate exchange with Martha is worthy of our attention. Martha: *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* Most of us have prayed that prayer. Lord, if you had been here – if you had intervened sooner, if you had answered my plea, if you had not seemed so absent – this would not have happened. It's an honest prayer, so very human, and Jesus does not rebuke Martha for it. Instead, he makes her a promise: *"You brother will rise ... I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."*

Jesus then goes to the tomb, where he sees Mary weeping and the others weeping with her. The gospel tells us that, in the presence of such grief, *"he became perturbed and deeply troubled"* and then simply, *"Jesus wept."* The Son of God, who is about to command death itself, first stands and sheds tears with those who mourn. This is what it means for Jesus to be Emmanuel, God-with-us – not distant and unmoved, but near, present, and moved to his very depths by the grief and sorrow of his creation.

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This gospel reveals something universal about the human condition and human experience. Each one of us here has known some form of being bound. Some are bound by addiction – to substances, to screens, to habits that diminish us. Others are bound by anger or resentment, carrying a wound that over years has hardened into

something sharp and heavy. Some are bound by fear – fear of failure, fear of being truly known, fear of not being perfect. Others are bound by grief, unable to imagine life beyond some great loss. Some are bound by shame, convinced that what they have done or what has been done to them has made them unworthy of love.

The burial bands of Lazarus take many forms in our lives. And the Lord, his heart filled with sadness and compassion, says to us, as he said of Lazarus: *Unbind him. Unbind her. Let them go.* Lazarus was dead, and somehow he heard the voice of Jesus. We are alive. Will we fail to receive his word, to heed his command?

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Notice, though, that in this gospel passage Jesus does not do everything himself. He calls Lazarus forth from the tomb – that much, only God can do. But then he turns to those standing nearby and says, *“Unbind him and let him go.”* Family and friends and neighbors remove the burial cloths. The community does the unbinding. This is symbolic of the work of the Church – not to raise the dead, which belongs to God alone – but to help one another shed the bindings that still cling even after grace has done its work.

We do this for one another in so many ways: in the sacrament of confession, where the priest pronounces absolution and the weight of sin falls away; in the care we offer to those who grieve; in the patient accompaniment of those struggling with addiction or hardship; in simply being present to someone who feels alone in

their darkness. Jesus's command "*unbind him and let him go,*" is spoken to us, and each of us is meant to unbind another, to be cooperators with God's grace in the lives of those around us. God breaks the shackles that bind, but then he commands us to welcome back those who had been shackled, to help them experience again "*the glorious freedom of the children of God*" (Rom 8:21).

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In a few moments we will draw near this altar, here to receive the body and blood of the one who himself suffered death and rose from the grave. The Eucharist is the body of Christ crucified, but risen, a memorial of his suffering and death, but also of his resurrection. In the Eucharist, we experience the power and the promise that Jesus makes to us: *I am the resurrection and the life. Do not be afraid. I have not abandoned you. Death shall not stand. Come out!*

So let us hold on to these words through this final weeks of Lent. Let them be our prayer, our hope, our confidence. Whatever tomb you have been sealed inside – whatever grief, shame, fear, or sin has wrapped itself around you and held you fast – hear the Lord speaking directly to you today, as he spoke to those standing at the grave of his friend: *Unbind him and let him go.* The God who made you for life – "*who fashioned all things that they might have being*" – is not finished with you. He commands the shackles that bind you to fall. He who is "*the resurrection and the life*" bids you to come out and live.