We received a phone call in the office this past week from someone looking for a mid-week Lenten worship experience that included suffering and presumably death. What we offer on Wednesday evenings, Holden Evening Prayer and faith testimonies, didn’t quite do it for her. Even prayer at the foot of the cross did not include enough suffering. I did not field that call. But I wonder if she may have been on a nostalgic search for the Lent of her childhood. The Lent of my childhood was more like that anyway. We spent 40 days focusing on sin and guilt and Jesus’ death as an atoning sacrifice for our sin.

But that’s actually an aberration from the way the season of Lent started out. Lent didn’t begin to turn toward a focus on suffering and death until the fifth century. In the beginning of the Christian movement, Lent was a period of intense prayer and fasting in preparation for the Easter Triduum, or the Three Days. These three days encompass the time from Maundy Thursday evening through the evening of Easter Day. Maundy Thursday is when Jesus washed his disciples feet, instituted the Lord’s Supper, and was then abandoned by his disciples only to be handed over to the authorities for sentencing; Good Friday is when he was crucified, and the Great Vigil of Easter is the celebration of his resurrection which included baptism of new converts. They were part of a process called the catechumenate. This was not about going back in time to remember; this was not a focus on Jesus’ death as an atoning sacrifice for my sin so I could go to heaven. It was about unbinding the power of Christ’s life, death and resurrection as a reality that begins now. This is how the church each year experienced the passage with Christ through death into life. And so it is for us again now.

The ones preparing for baptism during this period were called catechumens. They prayed and fasted for deliverance from the powers of evil. The community joined with them as an act of solidarity. The money they saved by not eating provided a way to help the poor. Every morning the catechumens were prayed over in worship, and they spent three hours a day in prayer. On the third, fourth and fifth Sundays in Lent, they were examined – I suppose like some of you were when you went through confirmation 50 years ago. These were called “The Scrutinies.” The gospel readings for those three Sundays were the very same readings, from the gospel of John, we have heard today and the last two Sundays: the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman, the healing of the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus.

As I mentioned two weeks ago, our culture today is more and more like the first century when it comes to the place of the church within it. It’s no longer the norm to be part of a church. The age of Christendom is over. So our GPS process is loosely modeled after the early church’s catechumenate process. And Lent is not so much about focusing on guilt and suffering and death, as it is about returning to our identity as the baptized children of God, claimed, met, called and sent to be God’s people doing God’s work – which is why it is appropriate that we hear testimonies of brothers and sisters in the faith who are living out that baptismal identity. Like the early church’s practice of fasting, our Lenten dinners this year represent something of a fast. They are pared way back, we are eating the food of the poor, and the money we are saving is going to Lutheran World Hunger, to help feed the poor.

The earliest Christians connected each of these three readings from John’s gospel to baptism and a confession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Two weeks ago we heard Jesus tell the Samaritan woman at the well about living water. Jesus is both the source and substance of that living baptismal water. The Samaritan woman is so very moved by that encounter she confesses her faith – that this man Jesus is the messiah -- and spreads the word to her community.

Last Sunday we met the man born blind. His image appears seven times in early catacomb art as an illustration of Christian baptism. (Catacombs were the caves where Christians gathered – they had to go underground because Christianity was illegal and practicing Christians were persecuted.) At that time the early church father Augustine, who taught candidates for baptism, exclaimed, “This blind man stands for the human race…if the blindness is infidelity, then the illumination is faith…He washes his eyes in that pool which is interpreted ‘one who has been sent’: he was baptized in Christ.” Enlightenment is a term used by New Testament authors to refer to Baptism (Hebrews 6:4, 10:32, many allusions in John’s gospel). And after his healing, the man born blind also comes to believe, to give his heart to the person and work of Jesus and confesses him as the Messiah of God. Like him, we too are sent by baptism to live a new life.

Which brings us to our Gospel for today. We meet a weary Mary and a weary Martha, grieving for their dead brother Lazarus. Jesus not only meets them where they are – at Lazarus’s grave, but joins them in their sorrow and weeps with them. And Martha joins the Samaritan woman and the man born blind in confessing her faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God.
What happens next is the last of seven signs or miracles in the Gospel of John that demonstrate Jesus’ divinity. This sign we witness today, bringing the dead to life, is the sign that trumps all the others. It’s a capital sign, we could say. If you keep reading in John’s Gospel, you’ll see that raising Lazarus from the dead is ultimately what leads the Jewish religious elite to call for Jesus’ death. It’s more than they can take. Too many Jews, even their peers like Nicodemus, are believing Jesus may very well be the Messiah. This is too much of a threat to the established order. So with this seventh sign, this portion of John’s Gospel ends (it is called “The Book of Signs”). From here all roads lead to Jerusalem and to the cross -- which makes this a rather appropriate Gospel to read on this last Sunday in Lent. Next week we will turn too. We will join Jesus for his triumphant entry into Jerusalem and then plunge immediately into Jesus’ passion, or his suffering and death.

But we’re not going there yet. Today, right now, we’re still at the tomb of Lazarus with Mary and Martha. And before we leave here there’s something critical for us to notice about exactly how Jesus performs this seventh and capital sign, and there’s something critical here for us to learn about what that means for us as God’s people doing God’s work. Notice that Jesus doesn’t act alone. He solicits help from the weary community gathered to weep with Martha and Mary. First he asks them to take away the stone. Hang on to that thought. We’ll come back to it.

After Jesus offers a pre-emptive prayer of thanksgiving, he calls Lazarus to come out. And then, when Lazarus does come out to the weary ones gathered to weep, Jesus calls on them to “Unbind him, and let him go.” One preacher put it this way: Jesus says, “I raise ‘em. You unwrap ‘em.” It takes the village of faith, the church, to help anyone and everyone raised by Jesus to become free of the strips of cloth that bind us in weariness -- that have been wound around us in the graves of this world. And there are as many graves in our community as there are potholes in the streets of Livonia these days.

Those strips of cloth bind us in weariness when, as St. Paul says in our second reading, we “live for the flesh alone.” By flesh Paul does not mean the skin of our bodies but a way of living, a reality, a cosmos that is dominated by death. The ‘Flesh’ seeks to constrain people in a way of life that has everything to do with death and with hatred of the God of life and love. Living for the flesh alone makes for weariness – not just for ourselves but for those whose lives we touch. That weariness comes in many forms: anger, rage, grief, sadness, fear, shame, loneliness, co-dependence, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, deep disappointment, chronic unemployment, failed marriages, broken families, scars from abuse, addiction, illness, fatigue, the frenzy of suburban life that doesn’t let us breathe, debt, disability, stress, resentment, that gnawing sense of unworthiness that overwhelms. It can be a weary land in which we live. Into this land comes Jesus, who meets us in our weariness, who weeps over it with us, and who both calls us out and calls us to serve. “I raise ‘em. You unwrap ‘em.” It’s what it means to be God’s people doing God’s work. And Holy Cross -- we are a community that knows how to do this. We’ve been practicing for a while.

Many many instances come to mind, but there are two I want to lift up. These are stories you have already heard in the form of testimonies during midweek Lenten worship. But maybe you haven’t thought of them in quite this way. Many many years ago a more devout, more gifted young Lutheran was not to be found. But he was also troubled and scared: scared of himself and who or what he feared he was. All this trouble made him feel unworthy. So he worked harder and harder. He lived in such a weary land. Eventually, after long years of anguish, Jesus called to him in that tomb of torment, “Michael, come out!” It took a while. He resisted. And resisted. He feared the consequences.

But eventually Michael answered that call. He came out as a gay man to his parents. They rejected him at first. The church college where he was employed started organizing witch hunts. He was out of that tomb of anguish, but the church was still as weary a land as he had known, and the strips of cloth still bound him. Eventually he came here to Holy Cross, and you embraced him. One by one, little by little, you answered Jesus’ call, “Unbind him, and let him go!” And one by one, you unwrapped those ties of prejudice and hatred and scapegoating and replaced them with the ties that bind our hearts in Christian love. Bless be those ties! Until finally you went public with that love with an impromptu, extended standing ovation the day of his installation, when Pastor Ben echoed the voice of Jesus and challenged you to embrace all of who Michael is. And you did. And the grave clothes fell at his feet. And then we answered Jesus’ call to come out and we did and we let the world know that we truly welcome all people, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, age or any other category society uses to distinguish between people. Our website even says so. “I raise ‘em,” Jesus says, “You unwrap ‘em!”

Which leads me to the other story I want to lift up. Once there was a weary man in a weary land called Detroit. He and his wife were keeping their weary Lutheran church going singlehandedly. More devoted and faithful Lutherans were not
to be found. Anywhere. But they were as weary as those dry bones in Ezekiel’s valley. Finally they surrendered. If their bones were going to live, their beloved church they would have to leave. So they did. And sure enough, the church closed without them there to keep it going. At first they rested. Then they started getting one call after another, invitations to come to church here or there or anywhere – in Detroit. But then one day Jesus called to them in that tomb of weariness, “Vern, come out! Betty, come out!” Leave your sphere of comfort and go where you can make a difference. Cross that blockade called Telegraph Road and help bring in the kingdom of God.

They answered that call. They came out of their comfort zone and started visiting Lutheran churches in Livonia. But the strips of cloth still hung on them. They were not always well received. Then one Sunday they showed up at Holy Cross, and you embraced them. One by one, little by little, you answered Jesus’ call, “Unbind them, and let them go!” And one by one, you unwrapped those ties of prejudice and hatred and scapegoating and replaced them with the ties that bind our hearts in Christian love. Blest be those ties! “I raise ‘em,” Jesus says, “you unwrap ‘em!”

Now – about that stone that blocks the entrance to – or should I say the exit from – the tomb in the first place. Every person – every person who comes through our doors comes from a weary land of one kind or another. Every person who comes through our doors has a story about answering Jesus’ call to “come out” of one kind of tomb or another. And there are even more people who aren’t here because of the stone that still blocks the way out of the tomb. I believe that stone is the filter people have about who we are and what we are about. People wrap us – the church – in grave clothes of prejudice and hatred and scapegoating – because they don’t know that we’re not who they think we are. They think if it says “church” it’s what they see on TV or read about in the newspapers – that we’re political and judgmental, hypocritical and condemning. That we’re like the religious elite so threatened by Jesus that they wanted to have him killed. That stone is so big it’s hard to hear Jesus’ call through it or over it or around it.

But Jesus says today, “Take it away.” And so we have to move it. We prepare to move it by experiencing together the Three Days: the passage with Christ through death into life. That’s how we unbind the power of Christ’s life, death and resurrection as a reality that begins now, in us. “I raise ‘em, You unwrap ‘em!” Then we move that stone by telling our story. We move it by telling our friends, “We’re not who you think we are.” We move it by sharing our welcome statement with people we know who live in a weary land of one kind or another and we invite them to listen for that voice of Jesus calling them to come out. We’ll know what to do. One by one, we will earn the privilege of unwrapping those ties of hatred and prejudice and scapegoating and replacing them with the ties that bind our hearts in Christian love. Blest be those ties! “I raise ‘em,” Jesus says, “you unwrap ‘em!” AMEN.

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God’s People Doing God’s Work
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