

**April 2, 2017**

**John 11:1-45**

Each year, as Easter approaches, it becomes more and more clear that there are really only two types of people in the world. Those whose preference is for the Cadbury egg, and those who prefer the Kinder surprise. Am I right? Of course I am! And it's all about what's at the **center** of these two treats, isn't it? Either, your deep down passionate desire runs toward the taste and texture of the creamy caramel that's found at the center of a Cadbury egg. (Can't you just feel its thick liquid embracing your tongue, and its sweet stickiness glued to your teeth?) Or, the little child in you is filled with excitement at the thought of breaking through your Kinder egg to get to the prize toy to be found at its center. (Don't you wonder, and love imagining, just what the toy might be; whether or not it will have moving parts; and how long you will be able to play with it in your clumsy adult hands until the toy breaks into pieces and falls apart?)

So, this morning, we are going to take a straw vote. Which of these two types of people are you? First, if you prefer Cadbury eggs at Easter raise your hand and keep it up. [fake counting] Ok, put your hands down. And, now, if your preference is for the Kinder surprise, raise your hand and keep it up. [fake counting]

Well, it would appear that the Cadbury eggs people have it.

Kinder surprise folks, we still love you.

When we're talking about a Cadbury egg or a Kinder surprise, really, it's all about what's at the center – and how we feel about and respond to what's at the center of each. Isn't that right?

The neat thing is that this may also be true of how we feel about and respond to a story in the Bible, or, to an entire gospel even. To illustrate this point, let's turn to today's story from the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John. Are you ready to

break through the shell of this story; desiring to find the creamy caramel, or excited to discover the surprise inside. It's all about what's at the **center**, remember.

First, let's start with the big picture. Chapter 11 is actually located at the **center** of John's Gospel: 10 chapters precede it and 10 chapters follow it. This story of the raising of Lazarus is a "hinge" point in John's Gospel. It marks the transition between Jesus' public ministry (which is the focus of chapters 1 – 10) and Jesus' private ministry to his disciples (which is the focus of chapters 12 – 22). In John's Gospel, the raising of Lazarus is the last and ultimate sign – in a series of 7 signs – confirming Jesus as the Messiah. It's also the first in a series of events to come that foreshadow Jesus' own death and resurrection. Much like the fulcrum upon which a teeter-totter is made to balance, the story of the raising of Lazarus is that upon which the entire Gospel of John is made to balance. (This is the type of discovery at the **center** of things that can get preachers all excited; though I do also enjoy the taste of Cadbury caramel.) Does this not make you think that for the writer of this gospel and for the early Christian community to which it was written, this particular story of the raising of Lazarus was of **central** importance to them? Does this also not lead you to wonder, as it leads me to wonder this morning, if this story might also be of **central** importance for you and me and our community of faith here and now?

The name "Lazarus" means, literally, "God help us." This seems like a fairly **central** prayer, still, for today's Christians; wouldn't you say? "God help us."

It's been suggested that in this story Lazarus represents the early Christian community that was shaped by John's witness to Jesus as the Christ. They were a small band of believers who, when this gospel was written, had been relegated to the edges of their society and the religious establishment. Marginalized. Like a

dead body, they were cut off; denied access to participation in the wider body of their society.

Lazarus' resurrection, then, would stand for this tiny Christian community's daring – at the call of Jesus – to come out of their places of fear, death and decay, and affirm that it is in Jesus that they live unafraid. Like Lazarus, despite their current predicament – face with the doubts, ridicule, even persecution of others – their belief in Jesus as God's Beloved and Anointed can still bring them true life and real liberation. Yes, I believe it could. And if this were so for them, my friends, could it not be so as well for us in the church today? For don't we find ourselves relegated, more and more, to the edges of society and the body politic? Like that early Christian community, for which John's Gospel first was written, might this also be such a time for us (you, me, and McClure United Church) to heed the call of Jesus in our own life. To come out of our places of fear, death and decay, and affirm that it is in Jesus that we live unafraid. To declare, daringly, our belief in Jesus as God's Beloved and Anointed and so experience the joy and the purpose of true life and real liberation? Challenging any who would marginalize, disenfranchise, or deny others access to participation in the wider body of either church or society? Including challenging decisions made in a provincial budget? Jesus placed a little child in the **center** of that community which he had gathered around him, remember, when even his closest friends and followers would have pushed that child to the margins – would have cut funding for special-ed and caregivers to emotionally, mentally, physically and behaviorally challenged preschoolers; spiritual caregivers for patients, families, and staff in hospitals; public libraries providing literacy and educational resources to all; public transit providing access to marginalized communities and less-wealthy citizens. And, still, Lazarus rises! And protectively, Jesus wraps his arms around a little child a little

child and will not even let his friends and followers push that child from the center of this church's and this province's care and concern. Having heard the call of Jesus, Lazarus will not stay in the grave to which others (even those who love him) have consigned him. And today, at the call of Jesus, friends, neither should we.

What we say and do in the face of this or any predicament we find ourselves in shall, I suppose, depend upon who is at that **center** of our life and faith, and, what it is for which we are most excited, committed and passionate about as the **center** of our desire.

We've talked about the big picture; how chapter 11 is at the **center** of John's Gospel. Now, let's focus into the heart of this story. What words did John place at **center** of this story that's at the **center** of his gospel? These words are found in verse 27. And they are Martha's confession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Beloved of God. John writes, "She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'" Later, in John 20:31, we find stated that this is precisely the purpose of this gospel as a whole. There it says, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written (including the story at its **center**, the story of the raising of Lazarus) so that you (the early Christian Church, as well as you and me and McClure United Church today) may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." So verse 27 is not only the **center** of chapter 11 in this Gospel, but it is also the rhetorical and theological center of John's entire gospel. It constitutes its main theological statement, and it is verbalized by a woman – a marginalized person, not even a person, in her own day. The **center** of the **center** of John's Gospel, are these words of Martha's: 'Yes, Lord, I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.' Do we desire more than caramel, to taste

these words up on our own lips? Are we excited about embracing, passionately, the true life and real liberation that is ours when we too answer the call of Jesus? What and who is really at the **center** of your life and mine? What and who will we, from this day forth, **center** our lives around?

Friends. Do we feel inspired and empowered, today, to live into the freedom that we know is ours in Christ? Or, when we leave this place, will we choose to crawl back into the false security of our fears; roll the stone of doubt across the God-shaped opening in our heart; and keep our mouths shut rather than proclaim the love of God in Christ that we know is for the littlest, the least, the lonely, the last and the lost in both church and society? Will we live with embarrassing, exuberant, unseemly joy; with undying courage and unwavering faith; rejoicing in, proclaiming, and working for the true life and real liberation which is Christ's will for all God's people?

Yes, Jesus is calling us today. God is inviting you and me and McClure United Church to make a difference in this world, right here and now, in both little ways and big ways. Let us dream God's dreams, and let us live into God's plan and purpose for our lives. How do you and I and this congregation claim Christ's resurrection power, you may ask? We can begin to do so by recognizing – surprise! – that God has already placed this resurrection power of the Risen Christ at the very **center** of our being and **center** of our lives. That's where we are. That's also who and whose we are. Even when our days and our nights may feel like a long season of Lent, still, we are an Easter people! At least, that's what the Gospel says. And I, for one, am willing to take the leap of faith to believe and to live “as if” it is so. How about you? Who and what is the **center** of your life; that **center** from which you'll move out freely, now, to love and serve to love and serve the world?

Lazarus!! “God help us.” Amen.