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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Text: John 11: 1-44 (selected passages)
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Jesus In a World of Dead Souls

As a college student I went through a brief phase when I became enamored of the so-called "Oxford Christian Writers," those like C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien, who produced some of the great fantasy novels of the twentieth century – *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings*, respectively. On a semester spent in England, I visited the pub where they and other friends had gathered to share their work. I found Lewis's old church, where an ancient sexton showed us his grave, as well as a stained-glass window depicting the Narnia books. And I tracked down the man who served as the executor of Lewis's literary works, a man named Walter Hooper. I cold called Hooper on the phone one day shortly after Christmas in 1995, and miraculously, he invited both Rachael (who had come over for a visit) and me to come to tea one January afternoon. Hooper had been close to Lewis toward the end of his life, and he shared stories of their time together. The one that lodges in my mind is a comment that Lewis made as he struggled with an illness that he knew would end his life. "Poor Lazarus," Lewis was reported to have said. "He had to experience this twice."

My theology has changed considerably since that time, but I'll always hold those novels, and that visit, as formative influences that helped to shape me. But I'll also never forget that statement uttered by none other than C.S. Lewis as he lay dying, who sensed something tragic in the Lazarus story, whereas most of us sense a gift. Martha, Mary, Lazarus and Jesus himself – they're given the gift of time, more time, which is the greatest gift we can be given. It is, I think, one of the principal meanings of resurrection in the biblical sense – the gift of time, reclaimed from the grave. Even so, C.S. Lewis was wise to sense that that gift comes with a cost, for though it does not happen on the page, once resurrected, poor Lazarus will eventually have to die all over again.

One of the ways I've come to depart from Lewis over the years has to do with the way he interprets the Bible, and particularly that story. For Lewis, it's the record of an event that once took place. For me, and for many like me, it's less a record of a particular event, than a description of a dynamic that occurs within many human lives. You see, many people, perhaps most people, are tempted to visit the tombs before their time, leading in effect, to a premature death, a death in life. It's not suicide, per se, though that is the most extreme form of what the story of Lazarus is about. Rather, I've come to think of it more as a suppression of the self, a killing of the soul, where one's deepest and truest self is sacrificed, in order to fit in, in order to function, in order to get by. Lazarus is entombed before his time, and Jesus calls him forth in all of his ragged, rank, and beautiful humanity. Contra C.S. Lewis, I don't think that human beings struggle with the narrow passage from life to death just once, or in the case of Lazarus, twice. I think it's something we negotiate all the time. Meanwhile, Jesus allows it to happen. He doesn't stop it from taking place, for it is never his intention to reduce human freedom. But he does eventually arrive on site, standing outside the tombs we create. And to Lazarus and all of us alike, he says: "Enough of that. Come on out and live a little more."

This morning I want to think with you about some of the ways we choose to enter the tombs prematurely. But more than that, I want to think with you about what it would mean to

quit the tombs, and to get on up with Lazarus to reclaim and redeem the time that has been granted to us. When there is so much that would deaden our souls, I wish to know what it would mean to hear the voice of Jesus, calling us out of our burial clothes, so that we might reclaim our deepest humanity, which is another way of speaking about our souls.

Let's begin by citing the most basic way that we can respond to the voice of Jesus and emerge from our self-imposed tombs: we counter the tombs with our joy and with our celebration. If that sounds flip, or if it sounds pollyannish, I merely wish to refer you back to the events of last weekend. We gathered on All Saints Weekend to mourn the dead. We gathered to speak into our losses, which have been profound. But consider some of the voices that spoke throughout Jason Berry's film *City of a Million Dreams*, about the black funeral tradition in New Orleans (by the way, if you missed it, there will be an opportunity to revisit that film online later this month). One voice asks, "Could it be that the antidote to the poison in our struggle is to celebrate?" Another person gave voice to a similar question during one of the dance sequences from Congo Square. "How is it possible to be happy in an insane environment?" The answer, the film implies, is found in ritual, in movement, in dance, in music, and in exalted works of costuming and art. It is to be found in the counterintuitive impulse found throughout that city – to turn suffering into spiritual gold by dancing out of the cemeteries, and by joyfully decorating the very space of the abyss. That ability is grounded in the confidence that there is a transcendent reality in which God, or however that transcendence is named, is there to gather us when the end arrives. But it is also a way of listening to the voice of Jesus speaking at the edge of the tombs, calling dead and broken souls to come forth, and to live a little more, in celebration of the time that continues to be given.

That sense of confidence and celebration was extended to us when Dr. Michael White and his band played. It was calling us forth from the tombs we've been dwelling in. Even for those of us who suffered relatively little from the pandemic, the aftereffects have been hard to shake. In yesterday's *New York Times*, there was an article about how many people have been struggling with a nameless sense of gloom – from a pandemic that's been grinding on for too long, from the fractious polarization that we feel, and from the sense that, perhaps, our country is skidding into an antidemocratic future defined by misinformation, greed, loneliness, and a spiraling climate catastrophe. Those are very real possibilities that have gnawed at our souls, tempting us to take up a kind of permanent residence in the tombs. What I heard in Michael White's music was an acknowledgment of those fears, and a simultaneous rebuke of whatever temptations we may feel to allow ourselves to remain trapped within those fears. In fact, when Gregg Stafford got up to sing "Sunday Morning," which served as our call to worship, we were witnessing a kind of self-rebuke that Michael himself experienced after losing all his possessions in Hurricane Katrina. He became extremely depressed, but he wrote that song as a means of finding healing and hope as he, and the rest of the city, began to rebuild their lives. I'll listen to that song over and over again because of the ways it heeds the call of Jesus to come on out of the tombs, and to get on with living. That song – actually, all the songs the band played – became our summons as well, as we work to recover from all we've been through. To judge by the energy that pulsed through this place, it was a summons that was heard, and responded to. Jesus's call to Lazarus, and to each of us, is a call to celebrate the time that continues to be given to us, and to work for the betterment of our world.

But I'd like to push this understanding of Jesus and Lazarus as a perennial feature of human life in a different, perhaps more troubling, direction. And here I'd like to turn to James Baldwin's extraordinary novel *Another Country*, for it gives powerful expression to another way

that we're prone to dwell in the tombs. Midway through the novel, we find an arresting scene in which a preacher named Reverend Foster conducts a funeral for a young musician who despairs, and who takes his own life. Reverend Foster's sermon may be one of the greatest ever preached, real or imagined, for in it, mercy and truth-telling unite in a sacred embrace. The Reverend first urges upon his congregation a profound empathy for the dead man, saying, "I ain't going to judge him...don't none of us know what goes on in the heart of someone." To that, he adds a profound and difficult truth: "Don't many of us know what's going on in our own hearts for the matter of that." But he says more, far more than that. "You know," he continues, "a lot of people say that a man who takes his own life oughtn't to be buried in holy ground. I don't know nothing about that. All *I* know, God made every bit of ground I ever walked on and everything God made is *holy.*" And then he concludes his oration with these words: "And I tell you something else, don't none of you forget it: I know a lot of people done took their own lives and they're walking up and down the streets today and some of them is preaching the gospel and some is sitting in the seats of the mighty. Now, you remember that. If the world wasn't so full of dead folks maybe those of us that's trying to live wouldn't have to suffer so bad."[1]

Reverend Foster captures a deeper aspect of the Lazarus effect, which has to do with the blunting of the human conscience. He captures the moral and ethical death in which many people are entombed. But what he does best is to link the suicide of human conscience with the suffering of a great mass of humanity who are just doing their best to live. In an important way, it is the death of conscience that actually inflicts that suffering.

How are we to understand this form of the tombs? What does it look like when a great mass of people snuff out their consciences, while still walking the streets, while still preaching the gospel, while still sitting in the seats of the mighty? And what would it mean to hear the voice of Jesus, and to emerge from tombs such as that?

As I pondered Reverend Foster's great preachment, I came to imagine a great mass of humanity that had somehow learned not to feel. I don't mean a great lot of people who don't love their children or their mothers, or who don't get sentimental when they watch Hallmark movies. I mean something deeper, which is the will not to know certain truths, the will not to be troubled by certain thoughts, and the will not to delve too far into conflictual or troublesome territory. I'll do my best to describe it. It's the will to keep things light in conversation. It's the will to always and everywhere display positivity (though I hasten to add that I'm often grateful for the judicious and wise intervention of positive affirmations). It's the will to remain upbeat, cheerful, and happy, and to ruthlessly foreclose upon anything that would intrude upon one's "wellness," to use the lingua franca of the day. It's the will to edit out anything that would produce conflictual feelings. It's the will toward balance, where there are two perspectives for every story, and maybe three, and where we need to account for them all without ever adjudicating between them. Now please don't get me wrong – there are reasons to be careful about what we let into our conscious lives, and there's even greater reason to protect ourselves from the relentless needling that would stoke our every outrage at every perceived slight. And we can all use positive affirmations in our lives.

Still, I worry about what happens when those tendencies are taken to extremes. I worry that too much of that editing, too much of that avoidance, can make us emotionally brittle. I worry that it winds up rendering us trivial, and shallow. But I also sense that the danger goes far beyond than our social interactions. It actually winds up cutting us off from our own deepest selves, for eventually, we no longer wish to hear from those parts of ourselves that feel lost or

[1] Baldwin, James, *Another Country* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993, first published in 1960), pg. 121.

hurt, betrayed or just plain sad. Being cut off from our own deepest emotions, our own sources of sorrow, in turn, has the consequence of cutting us off from the pain and sorrow of others. And that emotional dynamic, in turn, winds up affecting public policy, where people cut off from their own and others' emotional worlds create laws that betray that emotional brittleness. I would contend that that's a large part of what Reverend Foster had in mind when he spoke in his sermon about dead folks. I would also argue that it's an example of living in the tombs, from which Jesus is calling us forth.

Those emotional dynamics are playing out in all sorts of ways these days. I'll name but one, having to do with the controversies faced by school boards across the country about the teaching of U.S. history. A few weeks ago, an email from Heather Cox Richardson caught my attention.[2] For those of you who don't know, Richardson is a professor of history at Boston University, and every day she sends out what she calls "A Letter from an American," recounting the news of the previous day while providing some illuminating historical context about those events. She's eminently sane, she's historically grounded, and she's sober in her judgments. On October 16th, Richardson detailed a law that will go into effect in Texas beginning in December, one that many other state legislatures and local communities are now considering. The law is entitled S.B. 3, or, the Critical Race Theory Bill. It's concerned that students have "an understanding of the fundamental moral, political, and intellectual foundations of the American experiment in self-government." But according to the new law, students are to get at those foundations in a very particular way, from sources like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, along with the writings of the founding fathers, the Federalist Papers, and the study of particular historical persons.

What's more interesting is what the new standards omit from the state curriculum, in the name of preserving civil discourse. Missing is any teaching about the 15th Amendment, guaranteeing black people the right to vote. Missing is any teaching about the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The writings of Frederick Douglass were struck from the teaching standards as was any mention of the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850. Gone is any mention of the 1830 Indian Removal Act, by which Andrew Jackson, among others, expunged native peoples from their land in order to expand a plantation economy. Gone from the standards are the history of white supremacy, including the history of slavery, the eugenics movement, or the growth of the KKK. Gone as well are any standards requiring teaching about the history of the civil rights movement. Should any teacher wish to discuss current events, it must always be done in such a way that opposing views are presented, and the teacher must never "choose sides." In a letter to faculty, one school district in Texas went so far as to say that if teachers chose to display a book on the Holocaust in their classrooms, they must always have on hand material that has an opposing perspective. One teacher pushed back. "How do you have an opposing perspective on the Holocaust?" she asked. The director of curriculum for that district responded, "Believe me, it's come up."

Such a curriculum, and such teaching, is how conscience dies. It's how the dead folks in Reverend Foster's sermon are born and nurtured. But beneath the particularities of what is taught and what isn't, I believe there is a story about human emotions taking place, which is about the inability to confront the pain of another, and one's own pain as well. It's a means of preventing any conflictual, or soul stirring information from interrupting a placid and superficial calm. It's a way of immuring an entire population from tragedy, especially from tragedies produced by

[2] What follows was published by Heather Cox Richardson, "Letters from an American," October 16, 2021. Published via email newsletter.

injustice. In essence, it's aim is to produce an emotionally stunted population who are unable to empathize with others. Empathy requires a deep understanding of the historical causes that produce pain and suffering. It is a kind of emotional labor that many people are simply unequipped, and therefore unwilling, to do. It is to die a premature death, and to take up residence in the tombs.

What I believe is that Jesus is standing outside the tombs. What I believe is that Jesus is calling each of us, who all bear the marks of Lazarus in one form or another, to come out of the tombs, and to live fully, deeply, authentically. I believe Jesus is the voice that is inviting us to become more fully human, and thus more deeply humane. That means celebrating the lives we have, and the time that has been given to us. It means finding a way every single day to discover or enact beauty and joy. But to live fully also means allowing ourselves to feel, and that includes allowing ourselves to feel sorrow and pain. It means getting in touch with our emotional lives, which has the effect of connecting us to what others are going through. That's a human struggle, but for those of us who are white, it's especially urgent. Because often, no matter how enlightened we believe ourselves to be, those of us raised and reared in such communities have used our money and our status to shield ourselves from the sorrows and struggles of the world. I have. I do. But I sense Jesus inviting me, inviting you, inviting all of America, to come out from the land of the tombs. I sense Jesus inviting us to sit for a time with the sorrows of history, and to feel things we may not have felt before. For many, that induces a kind of panic. If we can learn to sit in that place of discomfort, we might realize that it has been Jesus all along, calling us out of the tombs, and into a deeper and fuller existence. We may feel a wound. But we may also find occasion for joyful celebration, when at last we rise to our feet in applause as the saints go marching in, and as we clamor to be among them.

C.S. Lewis was right – it's painful to be Lazarus. It's a trial to undergo such a journey not once, but twice, or, as I have it, multiple times, all the time. But here's where I've never departed from that early theological guide: for Lewis, and for me, Jesus remains, calling us all to come on out of the tombs, and to take up our lives in full.