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John's Gospel tells such vivid stories about Jesus and the people around him that it's as though we're right there in the midst of everything that's going on. Today's gospel story is no exception. Chapter 11 of John's gospel throws us right into the action.

Four days ago, Martha, Mary, and some close friends had prepared Lazarus for burial. As was their custom, they purified his body with a ritual bath, just as he had been washed when he was born. He was ritually cleansed when he came into this world, and now, having been washed by his sisters in death, he would depart this world cleansed and pure for his return to God. Prayers were then recited. Lazarus' hands and feet, as well as his jaw and entire body, were then wrapped and bound in a white linen shroud. Even his face was swaddled so that he would be protected against the gaze of other people. And then Lazarus was carried out of town to his tomb with the crowd of townspeople. As they walked, the mourning and the grieving of the group would have been an almost hysterical shrieking. Death had exerted its full power on Lazarus and corruption of his body had set in. Darkness had seized him and taken full possession of him. All hope had perished and despair had reached its lowest depths. Martha & Mary's grief tore them between anger and sorrow—both of these sisters couldn't believe that Jesus had not come when they had first summoned him. Surely this would never have happened if he was here.

Four days passed before Jesus arrived. Four long days. Decay and stench had taken their normal course, and to all who were at the site of the tomb, they knew that Lazarus was irretrievably dead. Jewish belief in those days believed that the soul finally left the presence of the body after three days. But now, four days had passed. John's story goes out of its way to tell us that information twice. Four days had passed! So, just in case we are wondering, yeah, it's really true. There's no faking it. Lazarus is *really* dead. He is off to Sheol, the Pit, the Jewish belief of a dark, shadowy underworld where all people go when they die.

Again, we have to remember, as I've said the past few weeks, both darkness and light play important roles in John's gospel. The theme of light in John's gospel describes Jesus and believing in Jesus, believing that he is the LORD, the Word of God, who has come into the world. In last week's gospel lesson, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." This week, again, Jesus talks about the light some more. When his disciples hear Jesus say that they are going to Judea again, they try to stop him. "Rabbi," they say, "The Jews were just now

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trying to kill you by stoning you to death, and now you're saying you want to go there AGAIN!" In response, Jesus says, "Aren't there twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day, they don't stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night, they do stumble, because the light is not in them." Jesus is the light of the world, and he knows this. In John's Gospel, Jesus knows that *no* darkness can overcome him. He's not afraid of the dark intentions of the Jewish leaders, nor is he afraid of the darkness of death, because as John chapter 1 verse 5 says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Although others have their doubts, Jesus has incredible confidence as he goes into Judea to face his own possible death, and also to face the death of Lazarus. He has this confidence because he is the light of the world.

As the stone is rolled away from the tomb of Lazarus, the doorway to death and darkness is opened. Standing at death's door, Jesus, the light of the world, looks up into the heavens and says, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." Jesus sends this glory, thanks, and praise up to the Father, because the Father has given God's glory to Jesus. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, this glory of God shines as a blessing between the Father and the Son, and this glory of God shines directly into the tomb of Lazarus as Jesus says, "Lazarus, come out!"

These words sent shivers up and down the people gathered around, and, what was probably even more terrifying, was that the dead man emerged from the dark tomb, alive and well, hobbling with the burial cloths dangling from his resuscitated body. What an incredible scene—the darkness that had looked final was not; what had seemed finished was a new beginning. And with this new beginning, Jesus says, "Unbind him and let him go!"

Jesus calls all of us to come out of the darkness. We need to hear his call to come to the light, and then we are to be unbound, and to be let go.

There is a woman named Teresa who was hard-working, successful, the youngest of six children and the only daughter. And like her father before her, she was an alcoholic. No one knew about her struggle—she kept it a closely guarded secret. It was an accident that she and Matt had met; they were tables apart at the same

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restaurant when by chance they both looked across at one another in the large dining room. They dated for years and for all of that time she successfully hid her addiction from Matt. It was not until a few months after they were married that the secret came out, and what had been so carefully concealed for so long, became an awful problem. She drank every day, and often got falling-over drunk, and every day she pleaded for another chance. Her new husband was both angry and frightened, and he didn't recognize the woman she was becoming. It was not until months later that he admitted Teresa for treatment. Like Martha and Mary, she sobbed and screamed, but she needed help and wanted to change—she just didn't know how. To Teresa, in her darkness, Jesus says, "Teresa, come out!" And to her family and friends, Jesus said, "Unbind her and let her go!"

Death is not just a grave in which our caskets are placed. Many of us die and still live. We can all name the tombs in which life places us—the sickness that holds us captive, the graves we dig for ourselves, the problems and situations that are beyond our energies and abilities, the awful pain inflicted on us by the cruelty of life.

David is about to turn 16. His mother and father have been divorced for as long as he can remember. His mother has physical custody, and David spends only a few days each month with his dad and his dad's second family. It's always awkward and uncomfortable—he feels like a stranger. His mom has been dating this guy for months and he often spends the night. They just got engaged, and David wasn't even told. He struggles with his school work, lies about his homework—he's flunking as many courses as he's passing. Neither one of his parents cares enough to be involved with any of his activities; they just don't have any time for him. David often tells his friends that he hates his life. Jesus says to David, in his darkness, "David, come out!" And to his family and friends, Jesus says, "Unbind him and let him go!"

Where is God when people feel dead? When hope has been destroyed? When human limits are exceeded? When we're ready to throw-in the towel because there's nothing left to do? Where is God? Do you believe that God ever withdraws from you and leaves you all by yourself?

Jeff has always been successful. As the oldest of four brothers, his parents had high expectations and pushed him to succeed. He is highly motivated, self-confident, and he's well on his way to building a great career and amassing an impressive net worth. His career is his life—it means everything to him. No one can remember

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the last time Jeff took a vacation. He's convinced himself that as long as he provides for his family, and gives them the best education and all the material things they want, he's doing his part. As successful as he is financially, Jeff has an almost callous attitude toward the many charitable requests that come his way. He's made every dollar of what he has and he doesn't believe in handouts. Jesus says to Jeff, "Jeff, come out!" And to Jeff's family and friends, Jesus says, "Unbind him and let him go!"

Sometimes we are in a grave and don't even realize it.

Everything about death and its darkness is untimely, rude, and hopeless, whether death takes a grandparent, a teenager speeding on a darkened highway, or an infant just beginning life. Each person who dies is assigned to a grave and each is placed into the earth.

We all face death. When those whom we love die, we are powerfully reminded of the finality of death and the terrible wrenching and emptiness of our lives. But we also face death and darkness if we lose our jobs, if marriages fail. Death and darkness surrounds us when we struggle with addictions, battle with cancer, flunk out of school, give up on family plans. Death and darkness especially attack us when we get wrapped-up in ourselves, and allow hate and resentment to control our lives.

All of our Scripture readings today show us that we experience pain and suffering and cry out in the presence of death and darkness and the feeling of being far away from God. But we see something else in our Scripture readings today, too. We see that God doesn't leave us in the dark. We see that God *never* abandons us in our graves. We are not left alone in the graves of *this life*, and we are not left for dead in the graves in which we find ourselves *at the end of our lives*. Although we may turn away from the light of God, our Triune God never turns away from us. Jesus never turns his back on the needs of those who love him—never, no matter how bad the situation, no matter how horrible our suffering, no matter how devoid of hope we may be, even when life beyond our graves seems impossible. Instead, Jesus comes to us, both in this life and in our own resurrection, and he says two things to us. He calls us by name and he says, "Come out! Come out of the grips of death and darkness. Don't stay dead and dark. Become alive and walk in the light. Come out!" That's the first thing that Jesus says. And the second thing Jesus says is that he tells our family and friends, "Unbind him and let him go!" "Unbind her and let her go!" Jesus does not want us to be tied up in sin and anger and anxiety

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and frustration. NO! Jesus wants us to live holy and good lives that are free to love and serve God and to love and serve those around us.

“I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus tells Martha and us. Jesus comes to give us eternal life after this life, and he also comes to give us abundant and grace-filled life in *this* life, right here and now. Our new life does not only begin after we have breathed our last breath or when our bodies are surrendered to the grave—our new life begins now. Jesus holds our lives in his hands, and he grants new life and transforms the lives of his believers. He calls each one of us from our graves by name and he says, “Come out! Be unbound, and feel what it’s like to be set free to live your new life in me.”

We thank God for this new life given to us in Jesus. Thank you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thank you. Amen