

Sermon preached at OCC, 22 March 2026

Let us pray. Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth, find freedom, and in your will discover your peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

From Onlookers to Participants of Life

John 11:1–45

Today is Lent week 5, and Jesus' journey towards the cross is getting closer. The Bible reading is about the death of Lazarus and how Jesus raised him to life, and it culminates in Jesus' words, "*Unbind him and let him go.*"

In this picture,¹ we see several people helping Lazarus, unbinding him, while he stands still with his arms crossed over his chest. He looks pale, but his eyes are open, and he allows others to unbind him. Although the reading doesn't specify exactly who unbound him, one thing can be inferred. Those who came as onlookers—those who came simply to see what would happen—are now drawn into something more. They are now participating in the work of life. In that sense, it is not only Lazarus who is raised. The onlookers, too, are being drawn out—from their limited understanding, from their hesitation, even from their unfaith—into something living and active.

1. Onlookers – Jesus' disciples, Mary & Martha, and the Jews

Onlookers are people who are present, watching what unfolds. They are not absent, not indifferent—but they remain at a distance. If we extend this into the spiritual realm, they are those who are close to the things of God, yet do not fully understand the life of God.

The death of Lazarus reveals who they are—and how they can be transformed. John 11 begins with the illness of Jesus' friend and then his death. Despite being informed of Lazarus' illness, Jesus does not go to Bethany immediately. There is a delay. And when he finally arrives, Lazarus has already been dead for four days.

¹ Painter: Anthea Craigmyle

That detail matters. In Jewish understanding at the time, there was a belief that the soul lingered for three days. By the fourth day, death was final. There was no more hope. And it is into that situation that Jesus arrives—accompanied by many onlookers.

First, the disciples. They do not understand what Jesus means when he speaks about Lazarus “sleeping.” They do not understand why he delays. Even when he tells them plainly that Lazarus is dead, they struggle to grasp what he is doing. And yet, they go with him. They are uncertain, even fearful—especially because returning to Judea is dangerous—but still, they go. They are not without faith, but their faith is not yet fully formed.

Then we have Mary and Martha, and the Jews from Jerusalem who came to console them. Both Martha and Mary say the same thing to Jesus: *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”*²

There is faith in those words—but also limitation. They believe in Jesus, but within certain boundaries. Martha speaks of the resurrection on the last day. She holds the common hope of her time—a future resurrection, something that will happen at the end. But she does not yet see what Jesus is revealing in that moment—that resurrection is not only a future event, but a present reality in him. And the Jews who came to mourn—they too are watching. Seeing Jesus weep, they wonder aloud: *“Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”*³ Again, there is recognition—but also doubt.

So all these people—the disciples, Mary and Martha, the crowd—are close to Jesus. They care. They believe in different ways. But they are still, in many respects, onlookers.

2. Becoming participants in life eternal

Yet, in this extraordinary moment, God is not idle. If we follow the movement of the story—almost like tracing a series of action verbs—we begin to see something unfolding. Jesus says, *“Let us go.”*⁴ He invites the disciples to move, even without full understanding. He asks Martha, *“Do you believe this?”*⁵ He draws her into a deeper confession—not just of future hope, but present trust. Then, standing before the tomb, Jesus says, *“Take away the stone.”*⁶

² John 11:21, 32

³ John 11:37

⁴ John 11:7, 15

⁵ John 11:26

⁶ John 11:39

He involves those standing there in the very moment of God's action. He prays—not because he needs to be heard, but so that others may believe. Then he cries out, *“Lazarus, come out.”*⁷ And the dead man comes out, still bound. And finally, Jesus says to the people, *“Unbind him, and let him go.”*⁸

At that moment, something changes. Those who were watching are now doing. Those who were observing are now acting. And we begin to see that not all onlookers are the same. But there are differences among them. The disciples go with Jesus, even without clarity. Martha believes before she sees. Others believe only after they witness the sign.

But all are being drawn, step by step, into participation. And this is where we might recall the story of the donkey in the well. At first, the donkey is overwhelmed. Each shovelful of dirt feels like the end. But then, something shifts within him. What once seemed like a threat becomes, step by step, something he can stand on. He begins to use what is thrown upon him. And slowly, almost unexpectedly, a path of life emerges out of what looked like death. Now, that is a powerful image. It speaks of resilience. It speaks of a change in perspective—of responding differently to what is happening. But the Gospel today takes us further. Because Lazarus cannot do what the donkey did.

He cannot step up. He cannot climb out. He cannot free himself. He must be called out. And even when he comes out, he is still bound hand and foot. It is others who must unbind him. So this is no longer simply a story about resilience, or about how we respond to difficult circumstances. It is a story about the life that comes from Christ—and the people who are drawn into that life, and into that work.

We were not there at the tomb of Lazarus. But the Gospel places us there now. Some of us stand with the disciples—uncertain, yet willing to go. Some of us stand with Martha—believing, yet still trying to understand more deeply. Some of us stand among the crowd—watching, waiting, wondering what will happen. And then the voice of Christ comes: *“Take away the stone.” “Unbind him, and let him go.”*

Life is given by Christ alone. But he does not act alone. He calls others to take part in that life. So the question is not whether we are onlookers, but whether we will remain there. It

⁷ John 11:43

⁸ John 11:44

may not be dramatic. It may be as simple as a conversation we have been avoiding, a step of trust we have been postponing, or standing alongside someone who cannot free themselves. Where is Christ calling you to step forward—not only to believe, not only to watch, but to take part? Who is it, in your life, that Christ is placing before you—and saying, “*Unbind them*”? For in him, we do not only witness life—we are drawn into it, and entrusted with it for one another. Amen.