

This gospel reminds me of times during the years I spent as a volunteer chaplain at Hartford Hospital. Once or twice a month I did the sixteen hour overnight shift. No other chaplains were around at night, and in an 865-bed hospital, it could get pretty busy.

Sometimes it was a happy kind of busy, cheering people up or exchanging stories. Sometimes it was a sad kind of busy, helping people cope with the death of someone they loved. That was always hard, but at no time did I wish more that God would use me for a Lazarus moment than when I was together with parents who were losing a little baby. Some circumstances in life are especially terrible. Fortunately that didn't happen very frequently, but other passages did.

One evening I spent a fair amount of time with a woman who had lost her husband suddenly. After several hours at his bedside, she turned to me and said she was ready to leave. As I walked her to the door, the woman thanked me and asked "How can you do this?" I asked her what she meant. "How are you able to share people's losses the way you did with me?" she asked. "Doesn't it get to you?"

I hadn't ever really thought about that too much, so I just told her the truth as I see it – it's simply a gift God gave me so that people could know for sure that God was with them, even in the midst of intense suffering. It just happens to be something I can do, just the same way you can do the stuff you can do.

More deeply, it's how God expresses God's Self through us, and how each of us in the moment find ourselves responding to God's loving, compassionate will, vibrant and alive within us. It's us giving to others what we ourselves receive in the Eucharist.

I wondered if Jesus had ever been asked a similar question. Even if he hadn't, I suspect the story of Lazarus tells us what his answer probably would've been.

We parted with a hug and I went off, pondering her words. I had helped her, she'd said, no less than the doctors and nurses had been helping her husband, but in a different way. It occurred to me that if I'd been like anyone in the story of Lazarus, it was one of the folks to whom Jesus said "Unbind him and let him go free." As I thought about that some more, it seemed to me that all of us are in that situation sooner or later in our lives. We all have a part to play as the meaning of the gospel of Lazarus unfolds in our time.

God our Father will always do the bringing to life part. Your mission and mine is to do the unbinding. Maybe someone we know has suffered from the death of an addiction or some other especially terrible circumstance in life. God will give them life again, but we're the ones who are asked to do the unbinding; to free people up so they can enjoy life to the full again.

Let me tell you a story about what that looks like today. My friend Casey, not his real name of course, had a problem with alcohol. Those who suffer from this disease know very well that it is a form of death, but Casey confused the illusion of life that alcohol gave him with the life that God had actually given him.

An emotionally cold and distant family with abusive, alcoholic parents had left young Casey with little knowledge of how to cope with life. Addiction, as you probably know, is the body's last defense against intolerable emotional pain, and that's where Casey went. As he grew, Casey built an illusory, alcohol-saturated world for himself in which his painfully unmet needs appeared to be consistently met. Unfortunately, none of the real needs in his life were.

Although he could function reasonably well, people could sooner or later tell that something wasn't right. Responsibilities were left unfulfilled, relationships soured. He couldn't hold a job. Fortunately for Casey, a close cousin recognized what was happening and stuck with

Casey over the years, urging him to get him the help he really needed. That kind of help always requires people to hit bottom, and hit it hard. The lucky ones don't die.

As far as they're concerned though, they may as well have. Casey's recovery required that his whole imaginary world come crashing down around him. With difficulty, he was able eventually to follow the twelve steps to sobriety, and remains clean to this day. He attributes his recovery to God.

When I asked him what it was like, turning his life around like that, he said "It's like coming back from the dead, Tim." He got thoughtful for a moment and added – "You know, it's like that story about Jesus' friend Lazarus in the Bible. God brought me back to life, but I was blessed to have been surrounded by so many good people. Not only were they there for me during recovery, but they helped me do the fence-mending that needed to be done afterwards. They helped unwrap me from my shroud."

Perhaps you too know people who are back from the dead and need help getting unwrapped. Maybe they've recovered from an addiction or some other terrible circumstance that deadened their spirit and they're standing there bewildered, wondering how to get on with life.

It could be someone in school or work who has gone through difficult times and needs us to supply, prudently, the permission and assistance to come back and rejoin the rest of us. Perhaps it is we ourselves who are in a bind. Are you and I the ones who need to respond to God's call to come forth and allow ourselves to be unwrapped by those who love us?

The cause of death is immaterial. God will always do the bringing to life part, but at his command, it remains your task and mine to get on with the unbinding.