

Unwound: Why the Resurrected Still Need Hands to Set Them Free

“And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go.” (John 11:44, KJV)

The stone had been rolled away. The command had shattered the silence of the tomb. “Lazarus, come forth.” And the dead man heard. Think of it—hearing the voice of the Son of God while your lungs are still collapsed and your heart is still stone. He heard, and he lived, and he rose, and he stepped through the dark mouth of that cave into the blinding light of the Bethany sun. But he did not dance out. He did not run. He did not rip the wrappings from his own limbs. He stood before the crowd of mourners, alive from the dead, yet still bound hand and foot with strips of linen, his face still hidden behind a burial cloth. He was fully resurrected and still fully wrapped. And then Jesus, the very One who had called him out of death, turned to the community standing nearby and gave them a sacred assignment: “Loose him, and let him go.”

This is a picture the modern church must reclaim. The resurrection was a sovereign act—Lazarus contributed nothing to his own coming forth. But the unwrapping was a communal act. Jesus, who could have spoken the graveclothes into oblivion with a single syllable, deliberately chose to involve trembling human hands. He embedded the miracle in a family of faith. And in that deliberate choice, He gave us an everlasting lesson: we are raised alone by the voice of Jesus, but we are set free together through the ministry of His body. A resurrected man still needs others to unwrap his bonds, because God has so ordered His kingdom that community completes the freedom Christ begins.

To understand the depth of this, we must look at the nature of the graveclothes themselves. Lazarus was bound “hand and foot with graveclothes” and his face “bound about with a napkin.” These were no mere ribbons. In Jewish burial custom, the body was wrapped tightly with linen strips, often layered with spices—aloes and myrrh—packed into the folds. The cloth was wound around each limb separately, then around the torso, and a distinct head cloth wrapped the face. By the time the process was finished, the body was cocooned in a fragrant prison of death, sealed by the hardening of the spices and the weight of days. When Lazarus came forth, life was pulsing through every vein, but those trappings of death still clung to him with a literal and suffocating grip.

Now, look at our own lives. Before we heard the call of Jesus, we were dead in trespasses and sins—and dead men have graveclothes. The habits of the old nature, the wounds of the past, the lies we believed, the fears we nursed, the bitterness we wrapped around our hearts like linen strips soaked in embalming spice—these are the garments of the grave. But then the voice that spoke galaxies into existence called our name, and we passed from death unto life. “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life” (John 5:24). The resurrection is instantaneous. The life is in us now. Yet, if we are honest, we all emerged from the tomb still trailing the old wrappings. The angry tongue, the addictive pattern, the shame that covers the face like a napkin—these do not fall away automatically simply because the heart has been made new. They require unwinding.

And here is where the wisdom and humility of Christ shine brightest. He could have spoken Lazarus completely free. He could have said, “Come forth unwrapped and whole.” He did not. And in that restraint lies the profound dignity He bestows upon the church. Jesus loves to involve His people in the healing of His people. Paul would later capture this holy economy: “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:1-2). To bear a burden is to put your hands on the graveclothes of another and begin the slow, tender work of unwinding. It is the law of Christ in motion—the law of love that refuses to leave a brother bound.

The command of Jesus was plural: “Loose him.” It was addressed not to Peter alone, not to the grieving sisters Mary and Martha alone, but to the whole circle of witnesses. Everyone who loved Lazarus had a strip to pull. And notice the beautiful order: the voice of the Son gave life; the hands of the saints gave freedom. The same Jesus who had wept with them now invited them to become ministers of His resurrection. The body of Christ is not a collection of solitary pilgrims; it is a network of liberators. “And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular” (1 Corinthians 12:26-27). When one of us is bound, we are all bound in some measure. When one is loosed, the whole body breathes easier.

I imagine the scene. Lazarus, alive but blinded by the napkin, could not see who was approaching. He could feel the warmth of hands—some calloused, some soft—tugging at the linen that had begun to reek of the tomb. Perhaps Peter, impulsive as ever, pulled too quickly and then slowed down. Perhaps Martha, ever practical, looked for a seam to make the work easier. Perhaps Mary, who had washed Jesus’ feet with her tears, now washed her brother’s face with fresh tears as she lifted the cloth from his eyes. Each person had a role. Each hand was essential. The resurrection was one man’s miracle; the unwrapping was the community’s ministry.

This holds a searching question for every believer: have you allowed anyone close enough to touch your graveclothes? The enemy of our souls whispers that the wrappings are too shameful to reveal. He tells us to stay in the tomb until we look presentable, until we can walk out clean and composed. But God’s method is the opposite. He brings us forth still bound, so that in our vulnerability we will reach for the body and in our humility we will let others touch the very things that smell most of death. “Confess your faults one to another,” James writes, “and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (James 5:16). Healing comes through confession. Confession requires a brother’s ear. The private prayer is powerful, but there is a healing that awaits the public, or at least the communal, unwinding.

Now, let me add my own thought here. I am struck that the napkin—the facecloth—is mentioned separately. The face is the seat of identity. It is how we are known. When Lazarus came out, even those who loved him most could not see his face. They saw only the burial cloth that concealed his features. How many of us walk in new life yet still hide our true face behind a cloth of religious performance? The napkin might be a past failure we are afraid to name, a secret sin we manage rather than mortify, a grief we have never voiced. As long as the napkin remains, intimacy is impossible. We cannot kiss a brother through a shroud. We cannot look into the eyes of a sister through a veil of decay. Jesus wants that napkin removed by the gentle hands of trusted saints who will not flinch at what lies beneath. When they lifted the cloth, they saw Lazarus’s living face—flushed with color, blinking in the light, likely streaked with tears. That moment of unveiling transformed him from a nameless resurrected figure into a specific, known, loved person. Community restores not only freedom but identity. We find out who we truly are in Christ when we let others see us fully.

There is a further dimension. The apostle John would later write, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). Walking in the light is not just a vertical transaction with God; it is a horizontal transparency with the saints. The blood of Jesus cleanses, but the application of that cleansing often flows through the fellowship where we walk openly. Lazarus was in the light of that Bethany noon, surrounded by those who loved him. The light exposed the graveclothes, but it also enabled the community to see what needed to be loosed. As they unwrapped him, the sun touched skin that had known only darkness. The fresh air filled lungs that had tasted only the stale atmosphere of the sepulchre. Freedom was not a private epiphany; it was a corporate event.

The assignment to “loose him” also reminds us that the work of unwinding is often a patient, messy process. No one unwraps a mummy with a single jerk. The linen strips had been wound around and around, tied, and knotted. Some of them may have clung to the skin because of the dried spices. The hands that served had to get close enough to smell the myrrh and the decay. They had to touch the very fabric of death without being defiled. This is the ministry of restoration—getting close to someone’s sin without falling into it, touching the wounds without being infected, pulling gently at the binding without tearing the new, tender skin. “Restore such an one in the spirit of meekness,” Paul said, “considering thyself.” The meekness remembers that but for the grace of God, I would still be in those same wrappings. The community that unwraps best is the community that knows its own former stench.

And yet, look at the result. Lazarus was not only alive but completely liberated. He could now eat with his family, embrace his sisters, walk into Jerusalem, and testify of the power of the Son of God. In fact, John records that “much people of the Jews therefore knew that he was there: and they came not for Jesus’ sake only, but that they might see Lazarus also, whom he had raised from the dead” (John 12:9). A Lazarus still in graveclothes would have been a frightening spectacle, a walking enigma. But a Lazarus unwound and set free was a living witness. Your freedom is never just about you. Someone is waiting to see Lazarus. Someone needs to witness a life that has been raised and unwrapped. The community that does the loosening creates a testimony that draws others to the Resurrector.

Beloved, I urge you in the name of Jesus: find your unwrapping community. Do not walk around in the stench of old death when Christ has already given you new life. Seek out those who will not condemn you for the graveclothes but will faithfully pull at the knots. And if you are free, look around at the living who are still bound. Whose facecloth is Christ asking

you to lift? Whose hands is He calling you to loose? The miracle of resurrection has already been spoken. The miracle of unwinding now rests with the church. Let us become a people who not only celebrate the life Jesus gives but complete the freedom He begins. And may we hear one day, when every grave has been emptied and every cloth has been unwound, the voice of Him who said, “Loose him, and let him go,” now saying to us, “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:34). Until then, let us keep unwinding one another, strip by strip, toward the glorious liberty of the children of God. Amen.