Text: And Jesus said, Unbind him and let him go.

Does anyone besides me remember the PBS show Sesame Street? What was the name of that big, yellow bird? That’s right. Big Bird!

Well a few years ago, the actor died who played the character Mr Hooper.

This posed a difficult set of issues for The Children’s Television Workshop, producers of the show. Should they deal at all with the subject of death? Certainly any discussion of religion was strictly prohibited.

In one segment, Big Bird walks on camera and says to the cast: “I just drew pictures of all my grown-up friends on Sesame Street and I’m going to give them to you.” He passes out sketches and the cast members ooh and ahh over the likenesses. He’s left with Mr. Hooper’s picture. “I can’t wait till he sees it,” says Big Bird. “Say, where is he? I want to give it to him.” One cast member explains: “Big Bird, don’t you remember? We told you . . . Mr. Hooper died. He’s dead.”

Big Bird says, “Oh yeah, I remember. Well . . . I’ll give it to him when he comes back.” Another cast member gets up from her chair and touches Big Bird saying, “Big Bird, Mr. Hooper’s not coming back.”

“Why not?” Big Bird asks innocently.

“Big Bird,” explains the cast member, “when people die, they don’t come back.”

Well, they don’t come back unless their name is Lazarus. They don’t come back unless their name is Jesus. And they don’t come back unless they are baptised into the Faith of the Church, and live a life of faith and devotion until the end.

Unbind him and let him go.

When people die, they usually stay dead. It’s just tidier for all concerned, isn’t it? The ministry of Christ is coming to its climax in the Lenten story. A fortnight ago we heard about Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night. Jesus is Messiah to the Jews. Last week, we heard about the outcast woman belonging to an outcast people. Jesus is Messiah to the Gentiles, and even to the dregs of this world.

The emphasis has been a picture of Christ breaking down barriers, attempting by his actions, to demonstrate that the Dominion and Kingdom of God will countenance no barriers: not religious barriers, not national barriers, not social barriers and not cultural barriers. In the

1 Adapted from e-Sermons, 2008.
healing of Lazarus (and yes, for you perceptive ones out there, I use that word deliberately),
he proclaims that even the barrier of death itself is to be eliminated.

The setting is Bethany, just two miles outside Jerusalem. Christ and his disciples have come
down from the north. Next Sunday we will remember his triumphal entry into Jerusalem; we
will rehearse the horrid events of Holy Week. And, at the Great Vigil of Easter, we disciples
who are no longer stunned and flabbergasted at this event, will celebrate his glorious
Resurrection.

Unbind him and let him go.

Clearly our Lord, and S. John, meant for us to see a connection between Lazarus and himself.
By healing Lazarus of the ailment called Death, our Lord was pointing to his own
Resurrection. But there are differences.

Lazarus was in the grave for four days. Jesus had deliberately delayed coming, and there was
no reason that made sense to anyone else for this delay. By the time, the decaying process
would have set in. Or, as the Authorised Version quotes Martha’s delicate protest at the
removal of the stone: Lord, by this time he stinketh!

But the Psalmist says: Thou wilt not let my body decay in hell.

No odour of decay is recorded, which was remarkable, and which probably tipped off the
onlookers. Jesus prays to his Father (which was probably the reason for delaying his arrival
in Bethlehem) and thunders for Lazarus to come forth. He stumbles forth, blinded and
shuffling because of the burial cloths used to wrap the body.

Unbind him and let him go.

Lazarus, returned from the dead, is loosed from his burial cloths. He is also, at least for now,
loosed from the bonds of death. You might call this the first death-defying act in history.
And, especially with the ever-practical Martha around, they all probably headed straight off
to their house for a huge dinner.

We hear nothing more about Lazarus. Presumably, he later died of old age or disease, but
this time Lazarus stayed dead … at least for now. Therefore, I’d like to use some holy
imagination, just as my own personal, fanciful thought. What if Lazarus was a witness to the
Crucifixion? As Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus, likely Lazarus wept at the death of Jesus.
Perhaps he was a witness to the Resurrected Lord. It’s a logical assumption, as they were
dear friends. Can you imagine our Lord NOT appearing to his friend?

No, we hear nothing more about Lazarus. But I like to think of him as a fearless disciple and
evangelist for his resurrected Lord. He may have thought to himself: what’s the worst they
can do to me? Kill me? Been there, done that, got the 1st century tee shirt!

Unbind him and let him go.

Eventually, Lazarus would die and stay dead … at least for the time being. But his healing,
his life beyond the grave, pointed to the life of the world to come. This is what his Lord and
best friend had proclaimed: I am Resurrection and I am Life.
Would that we would be like Lazarus: so unbound! Having experienced death and the grave, found himself unbound and released. Or as Big Bird should have said: Well, we’ll see Mr Hooper in the Resurrection!

Thus we also can say with confidence: I shall not live until I see God; and when I see Him, I shall never die.