

Sermon on the Raising of Lazarus, March 26, 2023

I've always liked this reading from the Gospel. I like it because there's so much in it that's so human. Mary, Martha and Lazarus are Jesus' good friends. They live just outside Jerusalem and he stays with them when he visits Jerusalem. Jesus has just been in Jerusalem where his teaching annoyed the Jewish leadership and they tried to kill him. He escaped and went out to the desert where John had been baptising, to let things cool off a bit. This is where he is when Martha and Mary's message reaches him: your friend, our brother Lazarus, is ill.

Jesus delays going to do anything about it for a couple days. John doesn't say so, but I imagine Jesus was a bit nervous about going back to Jerusalem to face them again. But finally he decides to go, even though his disciples try to talk him out of it. Thomas, his fatalistic disciple, says to the others, "Come on. We might as well go back and die with him."

Martha hears he's there and she goes out and says, "If you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died." She loves Jesus, but she's angry at him. Why didn't he save her brother? Mary says the same thing. She's angry, too. The one who loved to sit at his feet and listen to him instead of helping her sister. Other people are saying the same thing. I love that Jesus has no problem with this. In fact he shares their grief and Jesus weeping is at his most human. Or who knows? Maybe at his most Divine.

So then he goes to the tomb and asks that the stone be rolled away. Practical Martha raises an objection. It's a hot climate. He's been dead 4 days. But Jesus tells her to have faith, so they roll back the stone and he calls to Lazarus to come out. And he does! And then Jesus tells them to free him from his bindings and let him go. I've always liked that. Jesus gives us new life and sets us free from what's binding us, what's keeping us in our tombs.

This is one of seven signs that are reported in John's gospel, the last and greatest of them. We read another last week, healing the man born blind. By the time John's gospel was written, the Christian church had begun to realise that Jesus was not just a great prophet, but the Son of God as well. You can see this in the other gospels but it's not emphasized. Here in John's gospel, he hammers it home, with his signs and his passages where Jesus says, "I am." "I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the resurrection and the life, I am the way, the truth and the life," and so on. John is really wanting to point out that Jesus is more than human, he is also Divine. Sometimes I think he's so intent on that that he kind of downplays Jesus' humanity. That's why it's good we have 4 gospels with different things they emphasize.

Then in the Old Testament today we also have a story about God restoring life. In this case, he takes the prophet Ezekiel in a vision to a valley filled with dry bones. Very dry bones. Deader than doornails. And he asks Ezekiel if they can live again. The easy answer would be No. But Ezekiel knows that's probably not it, so he says, "You know, not me." God tells him to prophesy to the dry bones and they come together, bone to its bone, and muscle and skin grown on the bones and they stand up. But they're not alive.

Then God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath. Or the wind. Or the Spirit. To Ruah, which means all three, and he does, and the Spirit blows the breath back into their nostrils and they live. And God says, "These bones are the house of Israel. They think they're dead, but I am going to send my Spirit and give them new life."

What do these stories tell us about ourselves? About our lives, here and now? I mean, I've buried a lot of people and so far none of them has been restored to life like Lazarus was. We believe we have eternal life after death, indeed, Jesus tells Martha this in this passage. He tells her that he is the Resurrection and the Life and anyone who believes in him, even though they die, yet they will live. So that's one thing it means. But Lazarus didn't get eternal life in this story. He got more of the same life he had before. He was resuscitated, not resurrected, and he will die again at the end of his life, as will we all. And then enter more fully into eternal, resurrection life.

So what about now? Besides giving us hope for eternity, which is a very good thing in and of itself, does this gospel or this prophecy, give us anything for here and now? I believe the answer is yes.

If any of you have been coming to our mid-week services and listening to Rev. Ed's sermons, I think you will recognise some themes. If you haven't, they're on our website and you can still listen to them. They're good. Best spiritual practice I've been doing all Lent is hearing those sermons and thinking about them.

All of us have deaths in our lives. Not just the deaths of people, although they're of course important, but other losses. Things that have gone beyond recall. Our youth, for one. And some dreams. When I went to University, fresh out of high school at age 18, I decided to study history. I'd always wanted to be a teacher, though even back then I had thoughts of being a priest, but mostly for the wrong reasons. But I decided I would get a doctorate and teach history in university. This was my goal. I suppose I was helped along the way by the fact that it was about the one thing I could do to make my Dad really proud of me.

So I finished my BA and my MA and I was working through my doctorate when my biological clock started ticking really loudly. I was married by then, in my late 20s, and one of my colleagues had a baby and seemed to be able to balance things. I thought I could have a baby and also finish my schooling. Only it didn't work well. Babies, apparently, took a lot more work and energy than I had any idea of. Who knew? And Charles got posted out of the city, away from the University. It became harder and harder to study. In the end, I dropped out and had a couple more kids and did other things. Dad was not pleased.

People said, "You could still go back and finish, couldn't you?" Well, theoretically, yes. But in practice, I knew it wouldn't happen. By the time I got around to it I'd have to redo all the work I'd done. But it was many years before I really let that go. In fact, it was only when we moved here to Halifax ten years ago that I finally threw out the notes I'd made. Most of them! I found some the other day in a box I hadn't got to yet. But as long as I was clinging to that lost dream, I wasn't looking at what I was actually doing here and now. It wasn't till I let go that I could form new career goals. That's when I started in seminary.

That's the problem with living in the past, with the things we've lost. We can't see what we've been given here and now. Our vision is so focused on how great it used to be that we often don't see how great it is now. Different, but still great. One of the spiritual disciplines I've been practicing this Lent is letting go of the past. Grieving it, yes, and perhaps repenting some of it, but not clinging to it or letting it bind me. Letting it go. And turning to the present and the future to see what God has in store for me now. And what God has in store for us now is life. New life.

You know, many people in the church remember the glory days, the 20 years after World War II, when Sunday schools were packed and churches were bursting at the seams. We tend to think of that as normal and mourn its passing. In fact, it was a very unusual blip. The 20 years before WWII the churches weren't packed at all and nor were Sunday Schools. But still, that was a great time and we remember it fondly and wish it would come back. When we look at our churches now, we see declining numbers and older people.

Even if our sights are set a little more recently, before Covid, we see numbers have declined and there are even fewer younger people. And we can easily get into a mindset that says we're dying and there's no hope. We can easily get stuck in the past and keep wishing it would come back, and not even notice what's in front of us now.

Like the spring that creeps in so silently, it's easy not to notice. Last fall I planted about 50 crocus bulbs in my front lawn. I was looking the other day to see if they're up yet. No sign of blooms. But everywhere I looked there were green shoots with buds on them. I hadn't noticed them till I started looking. Just saw the deadish grass. But they were there.

There are lots of green shoots in our church. We've had 6 or 8 new people join us in the last few months. We're planning a baptism in June and we have 4 or 5 candidates. We've started Messy Church and regularly have a dozen or more children and their families come. We've been given about \$250,000 in the last few months, besides what you give. We have more stuff going on since Christmas than the whole of Covid altogether. My colleagues are seeing similar things in their churches. St. James had a drive in prayer day and lots and lots of people drove in for prayers. Total strangers. Wanting prayer from the church. At Regional Council last week, which can often be a pretty dull and boring gathering, we had a spirited discussion of new ways the churches can cooperate. It was exciting.

These things are all signs that the Spirit is moving. God is up to something here in Halifax, here at Emmanuel. There are new shoots coming up all over the place, pushing through the dead grass. Are we so used to thinking the grass is dead that we don't notice the new flower shoots? Are there things in our past, things that have gone, that we are clinging to so hard that we can't open our hands to receive the gifts God is offering us right now? Or things that bind us to the past?

The Spirit is moving and God is breathing new life into us, into our churches, even now. Lent is a great time to ask Jesus to unbind us, to look at our losses, grieve them and let them go, and turn our eyes to the new, resurrection life that Jesus offers us at Easter, to

open our hearts to the Spirit who comes at Pentecost. Come, Holy Spirit, breath of God: give life to the dry bones of this exiled age and make us a living people, holy and free.