

A Sermon preached 'at' Zion Episcopal Church  
On Facebook Live, March 29, 2020  
the Rev. Lucy D. LaRocca  
texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-45

What does resurrected life look like? One answer comes from this morning's Hebrew bible reading, in which a vision is given to the prophet Ezekiel who is in exile in Babylon. In a dream, Ezekiel is shown a valley full of dry bones. They may have been the bones of those for whom the people grieved, or perhaps the bones are symbolic of those who find themselves far from their former lives.

In the vision, God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, to tell those dried up remnants that God has a plan to put their lives back together. Upon hearing this, the bones reassemble, bit by bit. First the limbs are reconnected by little bits of sinew, then they are fleshed out and standing at the ready. But no life is in them until Ezekiel once more tells them God's vision and they become filled with God's spirit. Ezekiel then tells God's dream to his fellow exiles, who in turn tell it to themselves.

When the time finally comes to journey back to Jerusalem, the story of renewed life springing from the remains of loss and despair has done its work. It gives them the hope and courage they need to get up and follow that promise. After 70 years in Babylon the people might just have easily decided to stay where they were. A generation grew up there; and with inertia being what it is, the community could very well have decided, "What we're experiencing is probably a good enough life; this is probably as good as it can get, might as well stay put." Sometimes it can be hard to see that things could be different.

It is important to note the progression of God's vision. First, it is given to a person receptive to hearing from God. Ezekiel then participates in making that vision of renewed life a reality, first in the dream itself, and then by sharing the story with his people. God used this one person to bring the community back to life.

In the raising of Lazarus, the unexpected joy of new life comes to the community of Bethany. When Jesus arrived in Bethany, he was immediately taken to the grave of his beloved friend Lazarus. And Jesus wept. He then called Lazarus to come out of the tomb where he had been for four days.

You'll notice that Jesus he did not complete the job. Although Lazarus was out of the grave, he was not yet fully alive. The grave clothes, those bands of cloth wrapped around a body, were still on tightly, preventing speech and sight and movement. Jesus said to all the people around him; family and friends, disciples, the neighbors and community leaders... to the whole community gathered; "Unbind him and let him go." It is up to all of them to take away that which is still preventing Lazarus from living fully. Unbind him and let him go.

God has a vision for all of creation. It is a vision that has been passed on from one generation to the next for thousands of years, inspiring with the hope of restoration, reconciliation, and

fullness of life. Jesus put it this way: "I have come that you might have life and have it in abundance."

In order that we might have life. In order that others might have life; In order that our families, and those who are vulnerable might have life-we have had to let go of so much these past few weeks; things that we once thought were central to our lives -before the pandemic. Many have had to give up going to work. We have had to let go of our habitual gatherings of friends and family. We have had to let go of sporting events and other entertainments. We have let go of the many places we would routinely visit: stores, post office, the gym, and even church. We've let these things go, in order that we might preserve life.

We have been called -as surely as the community in Bethany was called, to participate in God's vision of the fullness of life. To let go of things that prevent life from flourishing. Jesus says to each one of us, "Unbind them and let them go!" What other things might need 'unbinding' so that we and others might be let go? What might we need to do to live more abundantly?

One idea might be to live each day as though we were dying. Palliative care physician Ira Byock noted that terminally ill patients were more at peace when they completed 5 tasks. These tasks are to say -to those to whom it needs to be said, "I forgive you." "Please forgive me." "Thank you." "I love you." And finally, "Goodbye."

The first four of these tasks apply equally well at any stage of life and can potentially help all of us to live more meaningful, loving, and vibrant lives. Forgiveness can unbind so much that has held us back from life. Expressing gratitude on a regular basis opens us up to the hundreds of miracles and places of joy we may have overlooked. Gratitude slows us down and allows us to live more deeply in the moment. Not everyone is comfortable saying the words, I love you. Sometimes I love you looks like making someone a meal. Or going out of one's way to help another. All those ways that we love God, our neighbor, and our selves. Sometimes, I love you looks like staying home so that others can be safe.

Forgiveness, gratitude and love can free our spirits and those of others. During these weeks of being sequestered, while we collectively grieve the great losses we face, I urge you to take on these tasks and with God's help, unbind yourself and others from those things which hold us back from living fully. One by one, piece by piece we can join together by the power of God's spirit, And find new life, even in the midst of difficult circumstances. May it be so. Amen.