

St James United Church

Message for March 26, 2023

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

“Set Free to Rise” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45



These last weeks we've been eavesdropping on conversations between Jesus and future disciples, each an expression of the reading at the start of Lent when Jesus invited two of John the Baptist's followers to "come and see" where he lived. But today we get a major shift from this. When Jesus is invited to come and see one of his disciples who is dying, he doesn't, only going to Bethany after his friend has already died. He says it is for God's glory. I find that to be such a shocking thing to say, so harsh, and so out of character.

That fact should tip us off that we're not to take this story at face value, but are supposed to look at what John is trying to tell us through it. The clue is in the phrasing that at first hearing sounds so harsh, that Lazarus' illness, and so death, is for God's glory. We think of glory as achievement, especially as we give someone glory for say winning the Brier and throw them a parade. But the glory John refers to is tied up not in power but powerlessness, in Jesus' death on the cross that leads to his resurrection, that is his sharing in God's life. We hear this at the centre of the story, as Jesus meets Martha and says to her "I am the resurrection and the life. All who believe in me, though they die, will live." If you recall from last week, we heard both Jesus and the healed man make an "I AM" statement, a reminder that Jesus is not alone in his sharing in God's life but invites us into that relationship. Today he tells us we participate in that divine life in his resurrection and life, a truth emphasised when he raised Lazarus from death.

But what does it mean to share in his resurrection, to share in his life? We often think it refers to what happens to us when we die, but as we hear in Ezekiel, resurrection is about this life. As the prophet speaks over the bones and they return to life, God tells Ezekiel that his vision is about the people who feel like they are in the grave because they are in exile, separated from their homeland and so disconnected from the source of their identity. That's a feeling anyone of us can share. We may not be away from home but can be cut off from our identity, from what gives us meaning, or a sense of purpose.

This sense of exile makes me think of my father when he was told by the College of Physicians that it was time to retire. The fact that he didn't choose the moment to close up his practice was hard on him. He often spoke not just of not knowing what to do with himself but also of not knowing himself anymore. He withdrew into himself and had few friends. This changed when he came to live with us after being diagnosed with dementia. He seemed to come alive as he was welcomed into the congregation and met some doctors and nurses. As they chatted with him about their mutual calling, he seemed to regain a sense of himself again. Of course, the

dementia progressed and the connections he made started to fade, but for a time he experienced a bit of resurrection. I'm grateful for that.

My dad's story speaks to me of an essential part of our gospel story. After Jesus called Lazarus to come out, he in turn called on those who were there to unbind him and let him go free. This speaks to me of how the resurrection Jesus promises to share with us is experienced most profoundly in community. This is something that was brought home to me when I was over at Queens this week. I was speaking with one of the faculty who also teaches at MUN. She shared a concern she had about her students there, how many of her students were doing very poorly and how a growing number needed accommodations in how they are taught and assessed because of extreme anxiety. As we reflected on our experiences in university, she noted how in the past there were times of global conflict or bleak economic forecasts like right now, but these young people face global heating too. The stark warning of the recent UN report on climate change makes clear the seriousness we all face, and yet all they see is political wrangling rather than concerted effort to tackle the situation. No wonder they feel anxious and seem to have given up. As chaplain I was curious about the students at Queens, and she observed that in contrast they seem much less anxious. "They have hope," she said, "and a supportive community at the college." As I consider the young adults at St. James, the same is true. They're stressed out but still hopeful, in good part because they know they can count on this large circle of older adults.

In both anecdotes we hear the importance of relationships. We hear this in our gospel as well with its repeated naming of the large number of people who came to Bethany to support the sisters. Now as I shared in our adult focused Learning Together, at one time the story of Lazarus may have been altered, a second sister added to it. But I also appreciate the version we have. It highlights the emotions we experience when someone dies, or we have to retire, or feel anxious about the future, or whatever it may be. We may be Martha who engaged with Jesus in faith, or Mary who withdrew and then was angry at how he delayed. In each situation, Jesus did not push but met them where they were at, reassuring them that they weren't alone. And that's how we're called to be with one another. We set each other free in moments of need not by achieving things for others but by taking time to listen and give them the space to discern their next steps, to be with them as the Spirit brings forth the energy they need to rise. It means being vulnerable with each other, being open hearted to their worry and pain, but in this we make space for new life. And not just for the person helped. In sharing we're reminded of the power of being in community, that we too are not alone.

Beloved, Jesus proclaims that he wants us to share in his risen life. And he fulfills this promise to us as individuals, giving us strength in times of weakness, insight when we're unsure, a feeling of hope to keep going, but I find we experience this most in community. Here as we take time for one another, to open-heartedly listen to and support each other, Jesus is here as resurrection, with us as life. There are times we may feel like we're in the tomb, but we don't need to stay there. Jesus calls to us to rise, not just on his own but into a community that's ready to unbind us and set us free. May we do this for each other. Amen.