

St James United Church



Message for March 22, 2026

Fifth Sunday in Lent

“Called to Share Life” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

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

Once again as we meet together, Jesus reveals who he is. Two weeks ago he told Photina, the Samaritan woman at the well, that he is the Messiah. Last week he affirmed that he is the light of the world. Today he says he is the resurrection and the life. These revelations are not for their own sake. Each time what he says of himself impacts others: Photina’s belief in Jesus brought others to faith; not only was the blind man able to see but his healing showed who truly couldn’t; and as Lazarus came out of the tomb, those present were drawn into the event. Each story reveals that they participate in Jesus’ identity, and us as well.

So how then are we to be the resurrection and the life? The clue comes not from the showy bit as Jesus raises Lazarus. That certainly grabs our attention, especially because four days had gone by. This meant he was truly dead, it being common belief that the soul lingered nearby until then. Lazarus being raised was definitely a sign of God’s glory. But is that the only point? As critical, I believe, is that it happens in front of others, especially as he calls those around the tomb to help Lazarus. The restoration Jesus brings Lazarus is experienced in community, experienced by us too as we share in his liberating and transforming love.

This happens in a few ways. First, simply being community. Lazarus is called out of the tomb in the presence of others. The tomb is a place of disconnection. He is not even present to himself given the four days elapsing. But as Lazarus comes out, he is restored to his sisters and to all who’d come to see them from Jerusalem. Being part of community is especially restorative in this time period, so many of us feeling isolated and alone, ironically so with so many on phones and other devices. Part of the dilemma in those devices is that they make us feel like we need to be doing something, be productive, answering email, making an impression, even just liking what a friend has posted. But as we come together our focus isn’t on that. We simply come together – to connect, pray, worship God who loves us as we are and not for what we do. That is restorative.

And a big part of restoration comes from prayer. A church is a place of spiritual welcome and caring. We can be that because we have been welcomed and cared for, not just by others in community, but in prayerful encounter with Jesus. That’s one of our main purposes, nurturing it in worship or group meditation, encouraging contemplative reading of the bible or walking in nature to name a few ways. And though I just gave examples of prayer, I don’t mean prayer as something we do to reach God. That makes it about being productive. I mean prayer as open-heartedness toward God who just wants to be known, who moves toward us in love. This love is

prominent in the text as we read repeatedly that Jesus loved Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Lazarus is given new life in Jesus' love, raised as he hears Jesus' voice. He speaks to us with the same. I realize that last statement can be a challenge. Many of us don't feel we deserve love, anyone's let alone God's, especially after so many of us experience hurt, judgement, rejection in our lives. James Finley writes about this in *The Healing Path*. In prayer as a young monk he felt an urge to share with Jesus the shame he felt from abuse growing up. As he prayed, he imagined unburdening his heart to Jesus who drew him in close, whispered "I love you!" He felt moved to say the same. That was a resurrection moment for him. He finally realized that the good news of God's love isn't about us measuring up to expectations of who we are supposed to be but the measureless expanse of God's mercy. In community we reassure each other of this.

Which leads me to the final way we're resurrection and life. It hinges on Jesus' telling the people to unbind Lazarus. We are concerned for each other, to ask, as John Wesley would, how it is with each other's soul. With the challenges many of us face, it's important to look out for one another, to pick up the phone if we notice someone hasn't been around, give each other a shoulder, not to solve problems but just to offer love. It is good to have that because none of us can weather life's storms alone. I know that personally. I've been in therapy for the last few months, seeking help with issues brought up by my dad's death. In the safety of a loving and non-judgmental space, my therapist has pulled away one burial strip after another. I share this because for too long I thought I could handle things on my own. We don't need to. I recommend seeing a professional. But alongside that, there's a role for a community like ours. In this space we assure each other we're loved, not in spite of the hurts, but honouring them as part of us, being Jesus whispering "I love you". We say that as we phone, stop by to visit, not to talk necessarily but just share a cup of tea. That is life-restoring.

This is who we've strived to be since 1958, still strive to be, important as we meet today for our Annual Meeting. It's also who we're called to be for the next generation. That can be challenging given that their needs or expectations are different from what many of us grew up with. How then are we to be church for the next decade and beyond? Answering this is one of the reasons we are in a process of discernment, figuring out how to be a restorative community in a new way. To get there we need to unbind together, the burial cloths around Lazarus representing his past, ours too. As we listen to each other in coming weeks, we help release expectations, assumptions about church, letting each other speak those as we also give permission to dream a bit. As we do, the Spirit breathes new life into us, taking what we learned from the past and applying it in new ways for our future. And not just our future, but for the future of our neighbours as well.

As we continue to pray, let us do so as a community, ready to live what it means for Jesus to be the resurrection and the life. He invites us to be instruments of his liberating love with and for each other. As we do, may we trust that he is with us, present in love, whispering "I love you" as we go and inviting us to extend that love, be him saying "I love you" to each other here at St. James, saying "I love you" to others in St. John's, saying "I love you" to our world. Amen.