

“Catching Our Breath”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
March 26, 2023 Lent 5

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

I remember my first association with death. I was watching *The Muppet Show* at night with my sister when the telephone rang. I heard my mom’s voice change from friendly, to surprised, to concern, to sadness. We had turned the television down, so my mom’s voice, upon hearing that my great-grandmother had died, had the choreography of furry, colorful Muppets dancing, and a sketch of the Swedish Chef cooking something ridiculous, throwing his ingredients into the air as he made his dish. The dissonance between these joyful and silly creatures and what I grasped was life-changing syncopated the natural rhythm of my breathing as the sad news stayed with me. Even though I never saw my great-grandmother’s body after her death, for years after that, I could not watch the Muppets without getting a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach and needing to catch my breath again. Not only that, for every death after my great-grandmother, at some point I have a vision of Gonzo in a helmet and cape, Miss Piggy with her purse, Fozzie Bear in his bowtie and briefcase, and Animal with his manic grin as messengers helping me to grapple with this news. I guess there will always be part of me that will associate the Muppets with death.

Martha associated her brother Lazarus’ death with smell. Her brother’s death didn’t look like the very dry bones, scattered in a valley, like the prophet Ezekiel saw in a vision. Death was recent enough for Lazarus’ body to still have flesh, but not fresh enough to keep the stench of rot away. Martha even warned Jesus that the smell was escaping the seal the tombstone offered; it followed them because the business of the dead was wafting through to the business of life.

That’s how death often feels, isn’t it? We cannot just let the dead be dead. I don’t believe in ghosts, but I do see how the dead are still among us— sometimes in beautiful and tender ways, and sometimes in painful ways.

Jesus walked this line between life and death, and showed us that we can look death into the face, and call forth life. He did this as an act of love for his friends, but he also did this as an act of love for us.

The word “love” cradles this passage throughout: first Jesus is told of Lazarus, “He *whom you love* is ill.” And yet, he did not leave right away to be with Lazarus; the scripture says again, “Even though *he loved* Martha and her sister and Lazarus,” he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Later, as he weeps— joining Mary and those gathered in weeping— the people said, “See how he *loved* him!”

The grief in this passage is palpable— and probably familiar. I imagine their sadness took their breath away. Do you know how that feels? The worst of the pandemic may seem like it's in our rearview mirror, but many of us still bear the imprint of the losses then: the Zoom funerals; loved ones saying goodbye over iPads; the seasons of missed birthdays, graduations, life passages. And just as life has gone on these past three years, death has gone on as well, with people dying from ordinary things unrelated to COVID, too. We have all seen and felt loss.

And maybe some of you have said to God, like Martha and Mary each said to Jesus, "If you had been here, my brother may not have died." Or my sister, or my father, or my beloved friend. Sometimes blame, or anger, or anxiety, or any number of emotions wells up more readily than simple sadness. One of the things I sometimes say to people when they lose a loved one is, "May God bless you with a full and cleansing grief," because I know that these other emotions can build a dam that blocks the rivers of tears that need to flow in order to be ready to experience new life again.

Jesus weeps here, and it's probably for the grief of his loved ones. But he may have been grieving for himself too, for knowing that his death will be coming soon. This act of bringing back the dead was the final sign that would send Jesus to his grave; his first in John's gospel is the turning of water into wine at the wedding at Cana. These acts catch our attention and maybe even catch our breath, in a good way, as they fill us with wonder and amazement at how it can possibly be true. These acts certainly caught the attention of the authorities, who realized that signs that include raising the dead will draw a following so big that the Roman authorities will have their eye on us. With a big enough following there could be a popular uprising against Rome, and that kind of attention will cause Rome to assert their power over us and our Temple, the heart of our people. If the dead can't stay dead, then what *can* we count on, really?

I have a friend, Amy Rush, who is a professional actor and puppeteer. I have seen many of her shows and have also watched her workshop puppets she has just made. Seeing Amy work the rods and strings of her puppets, and see there is an actual human body giving these creatures life has helped me feel a little less creeped out by Muppets; they no longer take my breath away.

That said, I hesitate each time I tell this story of Lazarus from our faith, because *it doesn't seem fair*. I know that our loved ones are not like Muppets. There's no Jim Henson or Amy Rush behind them that can take them from lifeless puppets into animated characters, having fun and making mischief. My friend Tara died suddenly nearly a year ago, and she was only a year younger than me. As much as I miss her and long for her to be back among us, especially with her wife and two young kids, I understand that God is not a puppeteer, and won't call Tara out of the grave— at least not in this lifetime, in ways that we can see and enjoy here on earth. So what does it mean to preach a faith that believes that Jesus can pull Lazarus out of the grave?

Maybe an earlier story can help us. We talk about resurrection like it's only a Christian thing. But much earlier than Jesus lived and performed miracles, God showed the prophet Ezekiel a vision of a valley of dry bones, and asked him if these bones could live. "Oh Lord God, you

know.” God asked Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, and he did: and there was a rattling, and “the bones came together, bone to its bone.” Then muscle and sinew and flesh and skin.

But there was no breath in them. Breath, in Hebrew— *ruach*— is the same word as Spirit, and the same word as wind. You have to have breath in you to live. These bones needed breath. But so did the people of Israel. Ezekiel had prophesied in the 6th century BCE, to the Judeans who had been exiled to Babylon from their home, their temple, and— some felt— their God. Beloved leaders had died. Ezekiel spoke to them as they wrestled with questions like “Does our suffering have a purpose?” “Has God abandoned us?” and “What will be left when this tragedy is over?” We can imagine that the *ruach* had been taking from them— the breath, the Spirit. They needed to catch their breath again.

So God told Ezekiel, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” Ezekiel did just that, and then, those bones lived and breathed, offering a vision of hope and of life to the whole house of Israel.

“You shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act.” This is what God told Ezekiel in the time of Babylonian exile; maybe the opening of the grave of Lazarus, and the calling forth of life, was a sign that this time God had promised is at hand.

Bones can tell you a lot. One of my Korean friends noticed that in the US, people describe each other by their hair color and texture and eye color. But among other Koreans, she told me, when there’s not a ton of difference in hair and eye color, “we describe another’s looks by the bone structure in their face.”

Lazarus’ sister Mary was probably familiar with Jesus’ bone structure. In the next chapter, she’s described as rubbing expensive ointment onto his feet and wiping them with her hair. The foot has 26 bones in it. I wonder, as she did that, whether she cherished the life within his feet: the stretching of his toes, the jolt from any sensation that tickled him, the relenting of tension as his feet relaxed under her care. Maybe Mary had been saving the nard ointment from after her brother’s death. I wonder if the death of Lazarus, even if it was temporary, had taught Mary to use things of value on the people you care about, while they are alive, rather than after they are dead. I wonder if Mary’s touch helped *unbind* Jesus in ways that helped him to prepare to leave this life, and experience death. It’s a wonder, the power of a friend, to help guide you along that tomb entry between life and death.

After Lazarus walked out of the tomb, Jesus called upon his loved ones, saying, “*Unbind* him, and let him go!” Anna Carter Florence notes that “God raises the dead, but *we are the ones who have to unbind them*. God calls us out of our tombs, but we are the ones who have to let one another go free. Pull the thread a little further and you may land here: Resurrection is not the

last act in this story. The last act is *unbinding*, and God gives it to us, to do on behalf of one another.”

Yesterday Levi and I led a workshop for 9 kids from our church. It began with one family, whose kid was struggling with teasing and bullying at school. I asked our church elementary and middle school families if this is something their kids experienced too, and if so would they like to talk about it at church. Almost all the kids I asked came yesterday. Not only that, but on Session, one of our adult members said, “Adults need to talk about bullying behavior, too.”

One non-violent strategy we discussed in response to bullying is to find a friend– or friends– who can have your back in the face of a bully. A friend can also help you to shake off whatever nastiness a bully has hurled at you. It’s good to be that friend to others you see being teased or bullied, too. We can unbind one another from the acts of meanness out there.

We may not be unwrapping death clothes from those who have been literally resurrected. But as Christians, we are called to unbind one another from the wrappings that seal us in our tombs. This is the message of hope our story gives us today. May God gift you with the ability to look at a valley of dry bones, and prophesy to the breath. May God help you catch your own breath when you are feeling winded and lifeless. May God, by the power of Christ, call you to life.