

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard
Lent V

April 6, 2014

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

Can We Live?

I read a blog that really struck me this morning by Mary Luti this morning called “Lazarus Isn't Easter”

This is what she wrote: “A distraught Jesus stands at the grave of Lazarus and bellows for him to come out. And out he comes, still trussed in his shroud. Mary and Martha are thrilled, of course; but I wonder what Lazarus thinks. Jesus has raised him, but the life he gets back is his old life. Lazarus has to die again.

We all undergo many deaths before we're finally raised to the life that lasts. And that's hard, isn't it?—to die and die and die again. A line from Lief Enger's *Peace Like A River* sums it up: "Drat, thought dying Lazarus—this part again."

A man opens another overdue bill. A soldier dives for cover as a bomb blows up his friends. A doctor spots new tumors on a child's MRI. A dieter steps back on the scale. A teenager stares at his report card. A spouse shouts things she can't take back. "Drat," they're all thinking, "this part again." We know what they mean. We're no different from a newly living Lazarus.

If the people who flocked to Jesus because of Lazarus were hoping to get what he got, they were bound to be disappointed. It sounds great, but it isn't the gift it appears to be. It comes with a 'drat' attached. Lazarus isn't Easter. Easter has no "this part again." For us who die and die and die again, it can't come soon enough.

Prayer

Holy One, it's not that we don't love our Lazarus lives. Even with their many deaths and drats, we do. But we long for Easter to flower in us, no drats attached. We long for lasting alleluias. Meanwhile, this is our hope—in life and death, we belong to you.”

I thought this was a good reminder as we look at the story of Lazarus and the dry bones this week. Because life is full of trials and struggles and yet as I was preparing for today I began to wonder if we expect enough of God and then I find myself wondering if we don't expect of ourselves. Do we ask too little of God? Do we ask too little of ourselves?

I ask that with some trepidation. We do believe that God provides all we need - don't we? "The churches of the Reformation, after all, have found their center of gravity and indeed reason for being by announcing that God provides all that is necessary for life and accomplishes all that is necessary for our salvation. We are justified not by our works, words, or actions but by God's grace and activity alone."¹ For this reason, in the UCC we are often cautious about what we ask of our people. We believe in doing acts of justice and care but we don't want them to think that we believe they can earn God's favour - or that they could lose it if they don't do things the right way.

"Yet while I firmly believe that theology, I also wonder if we have interpreted and shared it correctly. After all, it strikes me as rather ridiculous to imagine that God doesn't want us to do *anything*. The whole of the law specifies what we are to do for our neighbour and the world. The point of the Reformation is not that we aren't called to do anything -- or, worse, that we are called to do nothing! -- but rather that we do not enjoy God's favour and future based on our actions. We are therefore free to throw ourselves into caring for our neighbour and creation, responding to the needs around us, seeking to help those who are hurting simply because we know we *already* enjoy God's promise of life now and into the future."²

Jesus says to a questioning Martha "I am the resurrection, *and* the life." This claim is not only about Jesus and his only life but it speaks to the power of God for us. Jesus is claiming resurrection and life for Lazarus, Martha and the whole community. Jesus is claiming resurrection and life for us. The promises of God are not simply about life eternal after we die, or on the 'last day.' Rather Jesus is claiming his life work for that day. The gospel should make a difference for us now, make things possible *now*, open up opportunities and options now, transform relationships *now*. The promises of God are present tense, not just future.

David Lose points out "it's significant that after Jesus calls Lazarus by name to come out, and even after Lazarus does indeed hear Jesus' voice and come out ... the miracle... is not over. For after commanding Lazarus to come out of the tomb, Jesus then turns and issues a command to the waiting crowd as well: "unbind him and let him go." The community, in other words, is commanded to participate in God's action, to bring it to its desired end and outcome, to join in completing God's redemptive act.

It's astounding when you think about it? That the community of faith gathered around Lazarus is invited to participate in God's redemptive work? Yes, the raising of Lazarus from death to new life is entirely Jesus' work, and yet Jesus invites the community to participate; that is, to do something, something essential and meaningful and important."³

There is a group in the U.S. called "newAnthropy" that seeks to foster generosity and community action. I love the questions that they pose to get you interested.

¹ Lose, David <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3135>

² IBID

³ IBID

- What if we picked ourselves to be the heroes of our community, the broken, or the visionaries need?
- What would happen if we really believed our littlest actions make a difference?
- What would happen if a million of us and our small army of friends connected, collaborated and invested in a better world together?

They hold on to Margaret Mead's claim

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." - Margaret Mead

I think that is exactly the kind of inspiration Jesus desires of us. That is the kind of life we are called to. Jesus knows just as well as we do that we live in a broken world and that's why we are called to participate in caring for it. It's about saving the world - bringing forth the kingdom of God in whatever way you can. When I hear those questions I don't feel defeated, or like it's too big, rather I feel inspired. Inspired and empowered to live into the freedom that I know is ours through Christ.

So back to my original question: do we ask too little of God and ourselves? Do we dream God's dreams and live into God's plans? In little ways and big, God is inviting us to make a difference in this world right here, right now. God, in other words, is beckoning us to claim Christ's resurrection power now by participating in and completing the fantastic work God is doing all over the place.

Think about your life, your week, your work, your passions. Consider yourself and others you care about and now ask where you might claim God's resurrection promise and power now, making a difference in someone's life now. "It doesn't have to be huge (though it might be). It doesn't have to take a long time (although it might). It doesn't have to be spectacular (though, who knows, maybe it will be). Opportunities to unbind and let go abound, but we need to look for them so that we might hear Jesus calling us by name to make a difference to those around us.

In a way I am inviting us to claim our faith as a present-tense invitation to live promised salvation now. Because Jesus is the resurrection *and* the life and has promised to give us, not just more life, but life in all its abundance.

"Along those lines, just one more thought. While we call this scene "the raising of Lazarus," it's striking to realize that the actual sign Jesus performs takes up just two verses of the forty-five of this story. Maybe that's because, as is typical of John's Gospel, what matters most isn't the sign, but rather Jesus' interpretation of it and our response to it. Lazarus will die again, but the community empowered to unbind and set loose will endure. Indeed, it has endured, persisting through the centuries in works of courage and mercy, right down"⁴ *to us*.

I think we as a congregation are seeking to be generous and to care for community and world as we live out our faith through this project. It is easy for us to get focused on the budget, on the bricks and mortar and on the massive changes we are facing but what if this was about offering

⁴ IBID

new life to others, what if this was about extravagant generosity and care for community. What if we picked ourselves to be the heroes of our community, the broken, or the visionaries need? What would happen if we really believed our littlest actions make a difference? What would happen if our small congregation of friends connected, collaborated and invested in a better world together?

Sometimes it's easy for us to look around the room as feel like we are slipping away. Sometimes I even hear us claiming we are in the valley of the dry bones. At times we might even sound like Israel saying "our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, we are cut off completely." But I want you to look around again and I ask you is hope gone?

Perhaps more personally there is an area of your life where you are making that same claim. Do you feel dried up, have you lost hope?

I want to encourage you to hear God's spirit calling you to life. I want you to hear Jesus commanding you to live. I encourage you to hear Jesus asking you to participate in helping those around you live. Jesus said "I am the resurrection and the life." We claim to be followers of Jesus so let us live.