

Lent 5A
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 130
Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45

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St. Peter's Cathedral

Making Space for Life

It's a gift to be with you again in this season of preparation, of getting ready. Today, we step into the work of getting ready for the mystery of Easter by asking, "What does life look like?" If you were to close your eyes and describe what you see when I ask that question ("What does life look like?"), each of you would describe something distinct: someone who grew up on a ranch might envision the bright green of rye or clover pushing out of soil. You might tell me about a flowering plant in full, vibrant bloom, or a forest with trees and soil and undergrowth, all of it teeming with life. Others might describe about human life: your teenaged son huddled shoulder to shoulder with his teammates, preparing for a track meet, or the shouts and dashes and darts of children on a playground. Maybe you'd tell me about your squirming, hungry newborn grandson nosing his way to nourishment. Or maybe you'll talk about the way life sounds: a choir singing Handel's "Worthy is the Lamb," or an orchestra ringing out the first of notes of Appalachian Spring, or a group of friends overcome by belly-aching laughter.

In all of its forms, we know that life means movement. Life sounds and looks and feels like growth, sometimes like surprise or beauty. And we're here, in this nave today, to hear about, touch, draw near to, and receive life. Martha and Mary, Lazarus's grieving sisters meet us this morning precisely in the center of John's gospel. Before we get there, I wonder: do you remember how John's gospel begins?

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.....All things came into being through him...**What has come into being through him was life, and that life was the light of all men,**" of all people... It begins by talking about the life that God brings into the world. And John's gospel ends with the same basic concern: "these things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah...and that **through believing you may have life in his name.**" There's no missing John's message. We turn page after page, reminded by St. John that the story of God with humanity is a story of vibrant and surprising and abundant life.

When we meet Martha today, and she is angry, hurt, and hopeless. Jesus heard that Lazarus was ill and deliberately waited before beginning his several day journey to Bethany, and he is still on the road. He hasn't even entered the village when Martha meets him with an accusation: "If you had been here, my brother would still be alive!" Jesus doesn't accuse back. Instead, he affirms Martha's desire to be with her brother again. Then, it's Mary's turn, and she repeats the accusation: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!" In pain and grief, the sisters are pushing on Jesus.

We know this story so well, it's hard to remember that Martha and Mary have been waiting for Jesus to show up for days. Maybe they've been rehearsing their accusations, and when Martha sees Jesus, she is ready to launch her grief and pain at him. I bet she expects Jesus to apologize for being late, for missing the chance to be with Lazarus. Mary and Martha's grief in losing their brother will take time to unfold, and now that Jesus is with them, they can begin to grieve in earnest. They have every expectation that they will hold their pain and anger, and that Lazarus will continue to be dead.

Notice what happens between Martha, Mary, and Jesus. My seminary professor says this is, "like the dynamic any of us may experience in an acute crisis: people who trust one another enough to speak their minds fully are pushing against one another, hard. It is uncomfortable; it often generates anger. But the result of that pressure from both sides is that everyone moves forward to a new place, to a place where new possibilities begin to unfold. In this case all of them, including Jesus, move to the place where [...]God's glory can begin to be seen."¹ As they talk about Lazarus's death, Martha and Mary and Jesus is push on, ask more of one another.

Still, they expect Lazarus to stay dead. When Jesus asks Martha to roll away the stone, Martha is incredulous, and objects with words immortalized in the King James Version: "But Lord, by this time he stinketh...!"

For those gathered with Martha and Mary in Bethany, this account of Lazarus's resurrection, reminds us that life - in God's economy - is surprising, unexpected, and uncontrollable. I've shared with some of you a story about community where I used to live, one of the contexts in which I've seen life unexpectedly flourish in a place of death. Cedar Grove is a tiny tobacco farming community in the piedmont of NC, just a few miles from Franklin St, where people have been celebrating Carolina's win all night line. Cedar Grove is just a stoplight, a post office, a handful of churches and a lot of farmland. Some families in Cedar Grove have been living there for more than 300 years, since the king's land grants in the 1700's.

In 2004, a man named Bill King was murdered at his bait and tackle store in Cedar Grove. The store, had become a place of safety in a neighborhood where crack dealers were active: kids rode their bikes to the store to buy candy, people who couldn't afford to pay would buy food on credit there. Bill's family, his wife Emma and his kids were around the store a lot. The community was distraught at Bill's murder. As people began to grieve Bill's death, it became clear that the murder was racially motivated: two white men killed Bill, an African American man. People were angry and afraid, and in the parking lot of Bill's store, a prayer vigil was planned. The first surprise that came in the days after Bill's death was that more than 100 people gathered to ask God for peace, for healing at the vigil.

At the vigil, while the community memories of Bill and prayed together, a white woman named Grace, a Methodist pastor, confessed that she had never visited Bill's store even though it was just a short walk from her church. She said, "I guess I didn't think of his place as part of my parish, and that is wrong." A

¹ Ellen F. Davis and Austin McIver Dennis. "Preaching the Luminous Word: Biblical Sermons and Homiletical Essays." (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 277-278.

grandmother, a woman named Scenobia Taylor, heard that confession. Later, she said she believed God told her in a dream to give five acres of land to the community. She felt the land might help heal the community's wounds. So Mrs. Taylor, a sharecropper's daughter, approached Grace with an offer to give five acres of prime road frontage to Grace's all white church. You can imagine that it was hard for Mrs. Taylor's relatives and neighbors to stomach her giving her family's land to a white congregation after this murder, and you can imagine that not everyone in the Methodist church thought accepting the land (when the people in the congregation already had plenty of land) was the right thing to do. But Grace did accept the gift and over time, with the help of a lot of teenagers who needed to work off court mandated community service hours, a community garden was born as a place of reconciliation, a place where we could be watching for new life.

The way it worked was that anyone who came to the garden could lend a hand during set work hours, and people came! Professionals joined University students, who worked alongside young families, who weeded and chatted with high schoolers working off court mandated services hours. Southern twangs mingled with the cadences of Spanish, African immigrants came to pick sweet potato leaves and a Japanese graduate student drove nearly an hour every weekend to join in the work. Some people got rides to the garden, and depended every week on the food they took home. Every Tuesday night and Saturday afternoon after work hours, was a potluck. We all sat down at picnic tables and shared a meal before divvying up the produce to take home: salad greens, beets, blueberries, sweet peppers, depending on the season. In that garden, week after week, new life sprung up astonishingly.

When she donated the land, Mrs. Taylor had identified a list of homebound ladies we were to visit with produce each week as part of the deal. And on those visits, I saw that new life was not just present in the plants we tended. New life bloomed as high schoolers assigned to work with us, kids who weren't used to succeeding, cultivated and harvested onions, potatoes, collard greens with special care, delivering bags of produce with pride and a sense of accomplishment to the matriarchs of Cedar Grove. The ladies delighted in the students' visits. Being in proximity to life nourishes us, and those ladies just bloomed, lit up when the high schoolers would knock on their door.

New life is surprising. No one could have predicted that such abundant, unlikely life would spring out of the place where Bill King was murdered. And, of course, life is rooted in connection, bound up in relationship. The abundance of life and possibility that grew out of that community garden flourished in part because the individuals involved treated one another with honor, dignity, and commitment. After the violent murder, the community committed to pray. Mrs. Taylor listened to Grace when she spoke at the vigil. Grace heard Mrs. Taylor and didn't laugh at or dismiss her vision or her gift. In our distracted, over-committed culture, that sort of serious engagement with one another is exceptional.

Similarly, when Jesus meets Martha, then Mary in their grief, he honors them with attention, dignity, and commitment. We see Jesus genuinely moved by their experience of pain; so moved he becomes agitated himself. Even as they are

disappointed and in pain, Jesus takes Martha and Mary seriously enough to challenge them to look for, to concentrate on the glory of God; to look for the goodness, the power, the faithfulness of God. Mary and Martha have had a rough few days; I might have given them a break. But in their grief, Jesus urges them to a new kind of vision, a new way of seeing God's glory.

So new life is surprising, and new life is bound up in relationships of dignity, honor, and commitment. New life is also, always a gift that draws out our gratitude, our hope, as the Mrs. Taylor's gift of land drew gratitude and hope out of a grieving community. Lazarus's new life brings gratitude and hope that we see when later, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with costly nard as a way to show her gratefulness and her love.

Finally, in this story about Lazarus, we see that new life is exposed, vulnerable. Ancient images of Lazarus show a man wrapped up in strips of cloth like a mummy with his face just beginning to be exposed, his eyes wide open in bewilderment. Jesus says to those at the tomb, "unbind him!" Take off his grave clothes!

Lazarus has just seen death and now he is stepping into the beginning of his own new life. We know how tender and fragile new life can be: we instinctively treat young children with special attention and care. Can you imagine the tenderness and the care with which Mary and Martha must have tended to Lazarus in the hours and days after his resurrection? New life – in any of us – is exposed and vulnerable, and requires a commitment to tender, gentle care.

There is a series of images in Scripture about Moses' face being covered as he meets God; and an image Paul works with to demonstrate that as we receive new life in Christ, we are strengthened to unveil our faces, to be transparent to one another, to meet each other and God as we are. This spiritual gift, courage to unveil our faces, allow us to acknowledge our own limitations to one another; to ask for and share what we need. But this exposed posture also compels us to treat one another as people in whom new life is springing up, with special honor and careful attention.

Even in the church, we do not have the power to incant a formula and bring new life into places of pain and death, like we force a bulb to bloom out of season. Life is always a surprising gift. Life always comes from God. But it is our privileged vocation to prepare space for, to cultivate ground for the possibility of new life, to look and push and wait for God's surprising glory especially in places of deep brokenness and grief. *Amen.*