

Resurrection Power Now
Celebrating Diversity Sunday
Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-44

written by members of Saskatchewan Conference

Let us Pray
O God of resurrection power
stand before the tombs of our lives
and call us forth...
unbind us and fill us with new life
..... empowering us to see the places in our world
where new life needs to be called forth
and unbound
so that we are free
to see your love in every situation and every person we encounter.
By the power of the Spirit we pray, Amen

The sermon this morning
is one that was developed by a group of people out in Saskatchewan.
I've never used a sermon written by someone else before
so I checked it out with the worship committee
and with others who are working in the areas
of how we can intentionally be a more welcoming community.
You know – we tend to think that we are welcoming
but then we find ourselves laughing at ourselves when we see
a skit that shows us - for example - in announcement time
- talking about groups by acronyms – like UCW
unit # 1 will meet in the red room
(a room that hasn't actually been red for many years)
at its usual time hmmm – being welcoming takes intentionality
because we really don't mean to *not* be welcoming.

Sometimes we are not welcoming because of biases
we carry that we may not even be aware
could be hurting the people around us.

The sermon this morning tells the story of one family's journey
to finding acceptance within their church family
– for them as parents of a gay son.

The sermon does a wonderful job
of using the metaphors in the scriptures this morning
and developing how those metaphors could connect to our lives.

It is developed around two readings
- the one John read from Ezekiel
of the spirit coming and giving new life
to the pile of bones.....
and the one we didn't hear this morning
but will hear the pieces of in the sermon
of Jesus calling Lazarus out of the grave
after he had been dead for a time. And so we begin.....

In her book, *From Wounded Hearts*,
Roberta Showalter Kreider shares
*Faith Stories of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered People
and Those Who Love Them.*

In a chapters entitled, *Who Needs to Change?*
we hear about the life-changing experience of Martha and Paul,
“the parents of three sons and a daughter”.

Their “oldest child”, they note,
“was a delightful child, an excellent student,
a very kind and compassionate man.
He was baptized into our church...when he was 15-years-old. ...

He is loved and respected by his
three younger siblings, six nieces and nephews,
and a large extended family.
If you met him, you would say,
“What a fine young man,” and you would be right.

At the age of eighteen, he
“dropped the bombshell one evening
when he told [his parents] he was gay.”
As Martha and Paul tell it,
“When we were a newly married couple
we heard of a young man who was gay.
The person who told us that information
said that it was no wonder he was gay,
his mother was a battle-axe and his father was a wimp.
Can you imagine how we felt when we heard the news
that our wonderful son was gay?”
Conferring with their doctor,
they were able to get their son an appointment,
during which the doctor asked the young man a series of questions.
Based on this, Martha and Paul were told that their son
“was not a homosexual, he was just a late bloomer”,
which brought much relief to them.
“The doctor suggested [their son undergo] counseling
[with] the Inter-Faith Counselling Service” in their city.
“We were desperately hoping that the counseling
would change [our son] and we could put this nightmare behind us”,
they relate.
But instead, “the complete opposite happened.”
The young man “started to have a much better attitude about himself
[and] came to realize that he was the person that he was meant to be
and no one was at fault.
That was not the answer for which we were hoping”,

the then-distraught parents tell.
“We had prayed desperately that God would change [our son]
– and *quickly* before anyone found out!
... We were not free to go to anyone for several years
to unload our deep burden.

Anything we heard in church on this subject
was all so negative that we did not dare mention it there.
Now we wish we, too, would have gone for counselling
and told our pastors sooner.

Part of our church experience had always been
that the church was a safe place where
...you could share your inner struggles.

That security seemed to be denied us on this issue.”

In many ways, it seems that Martha and Paul
were in a similar situation as Ezekiel and the nation of Israel.

The haunting story we heard is
one of the prophet's best-known visions,
expressing hope for Yahweh's restoration of Israel.

In speaking to the peoples' experience
after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple,
the people are urged to look beyond their catastrophe
to a future that speaks to God's justice,
and promises redemption and liberation.

And the promised resurrection was more than
the enfleshing of skeletons and resuscitation of the bodies.

It included the restoration of the whole community.
The prophet's conversation with Yahweh emphasizes that
it is the Holy One who takes the initiative to restore life.

And while the people had lost all hope
– of restoration, of dreams yet-to-be-fulfilled,
of the future as they imagined it would be
– Yahweh vows that, not only will they be raised to new life,
but they will also return to their homeland.

The agent through which this new life would come
is the Spirit of Yahweh.

The Hebrew word employed here is *ruach*,
which means breath, wind and spirit.

It is the same *ruach* as in the Genesis creation stories,
the same vibrant Spirit that filled the new Church at Pentecost,
equipping those present in living out their calling as God's people,
and the same Spirit that continues
to inspire and empower God's people within the community
we are created, dreamed, and desired to be.

Yet, Ezekiel had a part to play
in the resurrection of the bones to new life.
He was to "prophesy to these bones, and say to them"
what the Spirit would do for them.

The prophet's collaboration with the Holy
was part of their resurrection experience.
For it was as Ezekiel breathed with the Spirit
that the dead were raised to new life.

Much like our story from John's gospel
– the "raising of Lazarus",
from what the writer relates to us,
Lazarus had taken ill
– or ill by whatever the norm was within his community.
And his family, Mary and Martha, sent word to Jesus that
"The one you love is ill".

But, "after having heard that Lazarus was ill,
Jesus stayed two days longer in the place where He was."

We're not told what the "illness" was that Lazarus "suffered" from.

At that time, many situations that people lived with
were considered illnesses,
and they were not necessarily physical ones either.

We know that the so-called demon-possessed suffered from what we today understand and call mental illness. The worldview of those who lived in the first-Century CE was that anything, or anyone, outside of “normal”, was living under judgement – often by the God whom they worshipped. Anyone who was not within the status quo fit into this box. So let’s suppose Lazarus was “not normal” – that this is what his “illness” was.

While we’re at it, let’s also think of situations that people today live with that society and, yes, God forbid, even many within the Church consider outside the realm of “natural”, or “normal”. What might they be?

Perhaps it’s a physical disorder, or a disability. Perhaps the circumstance was come by naturally – either from birth or a progressive affliction – or it may be the result of an accident of some sort. Could it be a developmental condition, or a type of mental illness in its many forms and manifestations?

Maybe it’s nothing like any of these. The person’s life-circumstances leaves her, or him, living with economic challenges, and they have been forced to rely on social services in order to “exist”.

Or, because of choices the individual made and followed through on at one time in the past, they’ve racked up a criminal record and perhaps spent time in jail, or prison.

Maybe they've experienced the loss of someone
who was their main source of support
– be it financial or emotional.

Or maybe it's a family member, friend, or someone in the community
who isn't living
the way *we*, or *others*, feel, or think, they should.

Maybe it's one of our young people
who've left school and are drifting
– maybe even become involved with drugs, or violence.

Could it be a young, unmarried, teenage mom?
Perhaps it's someone who has lost everything
and is now trying to scratch out an existence as a homeless person,
living on the street, with perhaps no choice
than to beg for whatever they can get.

Or maybe there is someone you know who identifies as
lesbian, gay, bisexual,
or one living with transgendering issues and concerns.

How do you respond, or react,
to someone you know or meet
that is living with any of these,
or perhaps other,
situations and circumstances?

Could these people be seen, perhaps, as “ill”?
Are they “dealt with” as persons suffering with “illness”?

Or maybe, just maybe,
it's you who are living in a situation thought as “ill”, as “sick”.

And you are not able to share this with anyone,
for fear of ostracism, shame, and rejection of some sort.

You're shut up, shut out,
locked inside whatever closet
it is that binds and imprisons you.
And you've been unable to find the strength,
the chutzpah, the wherewithal to get out of there.
How do you feel now?

The storyteller doesn't let us in as to the reason "why"
Jesus put off going to Bethany
– at least not right away.
But after two days, "He said to the disciples,
"Let us go to Judea again."
Just prior to the Lazarus story,
Jesus had been in Jerusalem, in Judea.
And once again, true to form,
He got Himself into trouble with the religious establishment,
who "took up stones...to stone Him."
Jesus high-tailed it out of there before He could be harmed,
going "across the Jordan".

And now – now He wants to go back there?
His disciples were concerned about this turnabout decision
on the part of their leader and spoke to Jesus about it.
But He addressed their apprehension:
"Those who walk during the day do not stumble,
because they see the light of this world.
But those who walk at night stumble,
because the light is not in them",
and then continued by noting that
"Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him. ...
Lazarus is dead.
For your sake I am glad I was not there,
so that you may believe. Let us go to him."

And once Jesus and His entourage arrived,
they were met by a very distraught Martha.

“You know, Jesus, if You had been here,
if You had come when we called for You,
Lazarus would not have died.”

Again, let’s suppose that Lazarus was “not normal”
– that he had been living with a circumstance
that would be thought “ill”.

Because of many the purity laws
– rules and regulations deemed “the way to live and be” within
the prevailing societal and religious systems of the day
– Lazarus would not have been able to participate in
the larger community, let alone the religious community.
He would be considered as much as dead,
with no hope of life at all.

And somewhere within herself, Martha perhaps knew that,
in some way, the Holy,
whom the Jesus figure represents in this story,
would be able to restore her brother to wholeness, to new life.

Yet, it seems as if the Holy
was nowhere around when Martha, when her brother,
needed that One the most.

So yes, Martha would be beside herself, if not hysterical,
when the Holy finally showed up.

It was, to her, a little to late for “show and tell”.
But Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

And then, going to the “tomb”
– that which bound and imprisoned
and kept Lazarus out of life’s fullness
– “Jesus”, we are told, “began to weep.”
Perhaps it was because of the way Lazarus
had been cut off and left for dead.

Or maybe it was because, as the writer noted a bit earlier,
Lazarus was “the one you love”,
and Jesus was angry.
We’re not really told, and can only imagine, can only surmise.
Whatever the reason,
He instructed those around to “take away the stone”.
“Open the door, and make a way
for the one who is dead to emerge once again”.
And again, Jesus met with more resistance
– from Lazarus’ family.
“He stinks, Jesus! He’s been dead for four days!
Why would You even *consider* what you’re asking us to do?”
But He was insistent, and the tomb was opened up.

And then, after thanking the Holy One for hearing Him,
“He cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”
The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound
...his face” also imprisoned “in a cloth”.

And Jesus instructed those gathered ‘round to
“Unbind him, and let him go.”

In his book, *Water Into Wine*, Tom Harpur notes that
“In the case of the raising up from the dead of Lazarus
... this was indeed the most potent, final symbolic act of all
. . . . To be raised to life meant
to be brought to a full awareness of one’s true spiritual condition.”

Those who had gathered around the tomb of Lazarus that day
were also invited into collaborating with the Holy
in bringing the dead man
to a full awareness of his true spiritual condition.
“Unbind him, and let him go”, they were instructed.

After many years of tremendous, difficult struggles
– including “Going to church and not knowing
who knew and who did not,
[which made] it very difficult to attend
...and be as involved...as we both were and still are”
and hearing “jokes and unkind comments
about homosexuals that were just not true”
– Martha and Paul did find community, support, and affirmation,
even if only from a few within their congregation.
“[But] it is so surprising to us how few people
are willing to really walk with you on such a journey”, they recall.
“The initial affirmation from some of the people
vanished when they realized
we were accepting of our son’s gayness...
We thank God for the few people who were supportive of us.”

“Our pain”, they write, “is no longer that of having a gay son,
it is a deep disappointment over the church’s attitude
toward our gay sons and lesbian daughters.
Some siblings...are leaving the church
because of the harsh attitudes directed against their [siblings].
Some parents are also leaving
because they do not feel the support
of the fellow Christians in their churches. ...
Too many...are listening to television evangelists
...and believing the misinformation and judgmental attitudes
that they promote”,
the couple has found.

And yet, as a result of their struggles
– both within themselves, and within their faith community
– Martha and Paul have become unbinders
– as they have embraced
not only their son and his partner of nearly twenty years,
but countless other
gay or lesbian, bisexual or transgendered persons
whose families and faith communities
have seen them not only as “ill”, but left them for dead.
They have also established support groups for,
and continue to provide counsel to,
many parents whose life-journeys have taken them on a similar path.

During the season of Easter,
we are invited to reflect on who we are,
and how we are, or are not,
living into that to which God created, dreams, and desires us to be.
Easter is a time to reflect on the ways
still need to unbind ourselves and one another
from attitudes that limit us from fully living God’s realm of love.

The Affirming Ministries Committee of Saskatchewan Conference
seeks to inform and educate our congregations
as to the belovedness, dignity, and inclusion of *all* persons
created in the image and likeness of the Holy.

We all – all – have our tombs and closets we hide in and behind,
for many reasons.

And, at the same time,
we are all invited, challenged,
and called to not only “Come out” from whatever it is that binds us,
but in turn to unbind those
whom society, and too-often, the Church, deems “ill” and “dead”.

“We are called to be the Church
...to love and serve others, to seek justice
... to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen...our hope.”

As we breathe with the Holy,
as we unbind those imprisoned and denied life,
the Spirit *will indeed* restore not only them,
but also us, into all that we can be.

And in the process, all will be restored to our homeland,
as we, together, journey toward resurrection.

Thanks be to God! Amen.