

### **Unbinding ourselves**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 2, 2017.

*Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. John 11: 25*

It is the sixth century B.C. and the people of God are living in exile from their homeland. The prophet Ezekiel is preaching a message of repentance. He is given a vision of his people in the form of a valley filled with dry, lifeless bones. The imagery of dry bones dramatizes the lifeless nation scattered in all directions. God assures the prophet that the bones will take on flesh to come alive as the people of God. The prophet envisions the Spirit of God breathing new life into the people of God for their return to their homeland.

Centuries later, God is at work again. This time it is in the town of Bethany, located just outside the city of Jerusalem on the Eastern slope of Mount Olivet. Bethany is known as the "house of misery" because of the many disabled people living there. It is the hometown of Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus who are close friends of Jesus. Lazarus is seriously ill and they send word to Jesus that their brother is not expected to live. They want him to come immediately to be at the side of their brother, but Jesus delays getting there for two days. In the meantime, Lazarus dies and his body is placed in a cave used as a tomb. By the time Jesus arrives, Martha scolds him and tells him that if he had gotten there sooner her brother would not have died.

Jesus takes command of the situation. He orders the stone rolled away from the entrance and commands Lazarus to come forth out of the tomb. To the shock and amazement of everyone, Lazarus emerges from the tomb, still bound up in his burial wrappings. It must have been a strange and eerie sight to see Lazarus walk out of the tomb as big as life. This is an opportunity for God's glory to be revealed as Jesus orders the bands of burial cloths removed from Lazarus. God's glory is seen both in the dry bones of the people of God coming together to form a new nation and in the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

There is a significant difference between the raising of Lazarus and the foretelling of Jesus' own resurrection. When Lazarus comes out of the tomb his body is still bound by the bands of funeral cloths while Jesus will leave his burial cloth behind in the tomb. The trappings of death will not hamper his mission. As Lazarus emerges from the tomb with the promise of regaining his mortal life, Jesus will be raised from his tomb with the promise of eternal life for all.

The strips of burial cloth that bound the body of Lazarus remind us how we can be so wrapped up in ourselves that we are prevented from living a full life. Repressed anger leaves us feeling depressed and moody. Thinking that we are the only one suffering a disability leaves us miserable and self-absorbed. Unresolved grief over a loss leaves us barely able to function. Jealousy over the success of others hinders our own attempts at success. Loneliness and lack of self-assurance compound our isolation. A serious illness can get such a grip on us that we are unable to perform even the simplest of tasks, leaving us bound up in despair.

There is something about an untimely death that causes us to grasp for answers, any answer. We are indignant over the shock of the disruption of the expected order of things. The death of a loved one is never convenient, nor is it ever timely. It occurs in the midst of life, yet when it happens it is an unwelcome intrusion in our otherwise fair minded and orderly way of life. We all have to work through our losses in our own way. They never really go away. We have no choice but to accept them. When we suffer a loss in our life, whether a loved one, a marriage, your health, or a job, it can feel as though we are staring into the darkness of an empty tomb. Christ shows us the way out of the darkness of despair to stand in the light of hope and possibility. There is no time like the present to get on with living the abundant life in Christ. In the spring when we plant seeds in our gardens, we are reminded that they have to be buried before they can come to life. Likewise, we first die to this life before we inherit eternal life.

We have choices. We can allow ourselves to feel victimized and spend useless energy over how our circumstances could have been different. Or, we can look with anticipation for what can be. Now is the time to unbind yourself from any anger that envelops your life. Unbind yourself from petty envy and jealousy over what others have that you don't have. Unbind yourself from blaming your parents for real or imagined faults. You never really grow up until you do. Just as Lazarus was freed from being bound up with burial wrappings, we have to unbind ourselves from the trappings of failure and disappointment to allow ourselves a genuine sense of hope and expectation.

When I began my theological studies, I was confident of my calling and vocation to be a priest. During my first year I began having doubts because I was unable to find my stride. At the end of that first year I was ready to call it quits. I spent that summer in a rigorous clinical pastoral training program in which I learned about the relationship between religion and mental health, developing some counseling skills and learning about myself. At the end of the summer, I felt like an exposed nerve but I was better able to focus on what I felt God was calling me to do.

That experience was like emerging from the dark tomb of doubt and despair. I unbound myself of the wrappings of uncertainty and learn to focus on what I needed to know to prepare for being a priest, pastor and preacher. Having found my voice, I completed the next two years of theological studies with a better sense of who I was and where I was headed. I couldn't have done it without the support of those who helped me to believe in myself and in what God was calling me to do.

If you ever find yourself wondering if you are on the right track and are not sure where you are headed, focus on the essentials of what you feel God wants you to do. Come out of the tomb of doubt and despair to pursue realistic goals that bring you to a greater certainty of what it means to be alive in Christ. You will be glad you did.