

**Lent 5A March 26, 2023 [Preached at St. Stephen's Lutheran,
Williamsburg, VA] Pastor Mary Anderson**

[Greetings to St. Stephen's and Thanks! Dear friends, Karen and Scott Ives, the planning team for the women's retreat, and to Pastor Jon for your welcome.]

You might be familiar with that hymn in the Justice and Peace section of ELW that sings, "The church of Christ in every age beset by change but Spirit-led, must claim and test its heritage and keep on rising from the dead." *Keep on rising from the dead?* That seems like a weird thing to say. Don't we believe the resurrection of the dead is what will be given to us one of these live-long days when God redeems the whole world with power and mercy and all will be made right and all will somehow live again? Once upon a time, Martin Luther taught us that every day when we wash our face, we should remember our baptism, but every day resurrection? What does that look like?

Why don't we first consult Mary and Martha who stood at the grave of a loved one and confronted Jesus with questions about why our loved ones die, about where he was when their brother was dying, and about why he didn't seem to do anything about it. They stepped in and asked all the hard questions for us. When Jesus, the resurrection and the life, steps up to the headstone, calls Lazarus out, and brings him out from death; we think, well, there you go, sisters of Lazarus – see, it's all ok now, your mourning is turned into dancing. And sure, they're amazed and relieved, except that, life goes on and so does the need for resurrection.

One thing that wouldn't have escaped the sisters' notice is that Lazarus would eventually die again. He was back to life, not immortal. They would grieve him again. The other thing that would soon become clear is that the

raising of Lazarus becomes the final straw that leads to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. In John 12:9-11 we are told that the chief priests were planning to kill Jesus, but Lazarus also because it was on account of his new life that so many were believing in Jesus. Let's get rid of the evidence of such things. Martha and Mary's grief would soon be doubled. You would think one resurrection would be plenty, but they were going to need more.

In a Bible Study this week, I brought up some of these questions of Mary and Martha. All the participants in that group are women in their 70s-90s. When we started a conversation about faith and grief, one woman raised her hand and said, "When my child died, I was really mad at God for a couple of years. I didn't go to church all that time. My son was two years old." Another woman in her 80s piped up, "My nine-year-old son died in a car wreck. My 16-year-old son was the driver. I don't know how I made it, but somehow I did." Another said, "When I went through my divorce, I was so crushed I felt like I couldn't breathe most of the time. It was like I was on life support for about six months and then rehab for the next six years. I questioned God a lot back then, but somehow, I came back to life." Yep, just open that Pandora's box of grief, and out will spill all sorts of stories of faith in Jesus and disappointment in Jesus. I'm sure more of you have been there, too, than any of us knows.

Every day, we all have to keep rising from the dead, have to keep reminding ourselves of resurrection promise, have to keep believing that the death, disappointment, and despair around us isn't the end, it's never the end. We need everyday resurrection.

Our scriptures today also tell us that resurrection hope isn't something we need as individuals but as whole peoples, cultures, societies, nations. Ezekiel stands in the middle of a valley of bones and is called to preach

resurrection hope to the long, long dead. How foolish that must have looked. But the Bible teaches that things are not always as they appear. Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones were renewed, restored with life just as the whole nation of Israel would be. The Spirit of God raises dead hopes every day.

The hymn reminds us that the Church, too, must keep on rising from the dead. Why does the church keep pouring hope and help into places like the West Bank, Sudan, and one desperate place after another. Why do we keep visiting the dying in their homes and hospice centers when there is so little hope? Why do we keep committing ourselves to the political process when there is so much division, cynicism, and hatred? Why? Because God is not done. The every-day resurrections are what fuels our faith.

In November, I was in Israel/Palestine. I visited many of the traditional sites such as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher built over the traditional site of Jesus' tomb. But I didn't feel resurrection there. Instead, I felt resurrection in Bethlehem. It was there behind the concrete wall where all the Palestinians are forced to live. I had heard for decades about the struggle of Palestinian Lutherans and of the work of the well-known pastor at Christmas Lutheran, Mitri Raheb. About 30 years ago he started a women's community center in the basement of the church to provide families with supplies and to help the women find ways to use their artistic abilities to make money for their households. That little community center is no longer in existence but I got the chance to visit what it has become. It's now a beautiful Lutheran university focusing on Palestinian arts and culture in Bethlehem. Pastor Raheb and his colleagues believe that by keeping Palestinian arts and culture going and growing, their culture will survive. Even in the midst of increasing death and despair among those people, in a valley of dried up hope, everyday

resurrections have kept hope alive. All the Lutheran communities around the world who have supported it have kept hope alive, including many congregations in the US. Seeing that place brought me to tears for the first of two times in the Holy Land.

We have to keep on rising from the dead. The church has to keep on rising from the dead. In this amazingly creative and difficult time in the history of the church, we are called to arise. We are resurrection people. We get it. We believe in it. The theme of our retreat yesterday was *Sewing New Wine Skins to Fit a New Generation*. The mission of the church remains the same but the methods have to be different. I was so humbled yesterday at the talent, life experience, and energy of those who gathered. Those kinds of gifts combined with the breath of the Spirit are what brings ministry to life. Those acts of mercy like the kits assembled for teenage girls, the care and compassion you have for one another, your determination to engage in relentless praise to God no matter what the time or circumstance, are all examples of every day resurrection.

We pray that at Jesus' word, we will be unbound and let go. We pray that we hear the resurrection call, Arise! And that we hear it not at the end of our lives, but all during our lives. Because the world is dying for us to believe that God is not done. Arise and live, O people. Amen.
