

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Holy Stench

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Grace and peace to you from the One who is already here, already reaching toward us, Jesus Christ. Amen.

We live in a culture that tries to sanitize death. One of the more obvious pieces of evidence for this is the language we use when someone dies. We typically soften our language. We say someone has “passed,” they’ve “gone to a better place.” We search for phrases that can take the sharp edge off the wound, as if the right euphemism could disinfect the air.

But the scriptures this week will not let us Febreze the tomb. Instead we are set down in Ezekiel’s valley, surrounded by bones that are not just bones, but “very dry” bones, bones that have been exposed long enough for hope itself to feel sun-bleached and brittle.

And then the Gospel of John walks us right up to Bethany, right up to a sealed place of loss, and lets Martha say out loud what polite religion often refuses to say: “Lord, already there is a stench.” Not “a fragrance.” Not “a gentle sadness.” A stench.

And if we’re honest, we know that stench is not only ancient and biblical; it is present tense too. The air of our world can feel thick with death, through wars and reprisals, through images of destroyed neighborhoods and grieving parents, through bodies and futures treated as disposable by the powerful. Even if the details change week to week, the valley of dry bones keeps showing up on our screens, and in our bodies, and in our prayers.

So here we are: not on the mountaintop, but in the valley. Not at the empty tomb, but at the sealed one. Not with a clean and shiny faith, but with a faith that reeks of real life. And that is precisely where Jesus goes. Not around. Not above. Right into it.

Because what happens next in Bethany is one of the most disruptive, holy moments in all of scripture: Jesus weeps. Not “Jesus explains.” Not “Jesus corrects their theology.” Not “Jesus reassures them with a motivational slogan.” Jesus weeps.

He stands with Mary and Martha, with their swollen eyes and shaking shoulders and exhausted anger, and he does not rush them past their grief. He does not tell them to be strong. He does not imply that tears are a lack of faith. No, instead he takes grief seriously enough to join them in it.

And John tells us something even more startling. Jesus is not only sad, he is “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” This language is visceral. It’s not a delicate melancholy. It’s closer to a groan, even a snort, like the sound a body makes when it meets something intolerable and disgusting.

Jesus is angry. Not at Mary. Not at Martha. Not at mourners who don’t have it together. Jesus is angry at the very reality of death and everything that travels with it: the theft, the separation, the trauma, the way it makes love feel powerless and survivors feel half-alive.

In other words: if you have ever felt angry in your grief, you are not disqualified from holy ground. You are standing in it. Because grief is not the opposite of faith. Grief is love refusing to pretend. And that’s why we need to reclaim grief; not as a private weakness, but as a holy disruption.

There is a kind of spirituality that treats grief like a problem to solve quickly. It wants to “get closure.” It wants you to “move on.” It wants you back to functioning, back to productivity, back to normal, as soon as possible.

But the gospel does not call grief a detour. The gospel treats grief as truth-telling. Grief tells the truth that someone mattered. It tells the truth that violence is not normal. Grief tells us that oppression is not “just the way the world is.” It tells the truth that what is happening to our neighbors, both near and far, is not acceptable.

Malkia Devich-Cyril puts it with fierce tenderness: grief is not an enemy to be avoided; it can make us more tender, and better equipped to fight for the liberation of all people. Grief can soften the places in us that have been hardened by constant

bad news. Grief can reopen compassion when cynicism tries to seal it shut. Grief can keep our hearts human in an inhumane world.¹

To grieve, whether for the dead in our own families, or the dead we will never meet, is to insist that life is precious, and that the crushing of life is an offense against God. So yes: Jesus weeps. But he does not only weep. He goes to the tomb. And there, the story turns toward a command, not first to Lazarus, but to the community: “Take away the stone.”

Notice how often the gospel refuses our fantasies of effortless miracles. We want resurrection without involvement. We want transformation without inconvenience. We want God to fix things without asking anything of us. But Jesus looks at the people standing there and says, in effect: “If you want new life, you are going to have to participate.” Take away the stone.

And here, Martha protests. “Lord, already there is a stench.” Which is another way of saying: “If we open this up, it will be unbearable.” And she isn’t wrong. Sometimes what we keep sealed is sealed for a reason. Sometimes we have learned how to survive by closing the tomb: don’t touch that trauma; don’t revisit that loss; don’t speak that name; don’t ask that question; don’t bring up that conflict; don’t talk about what happened to you; don’t open the thing that smells like death.

But the gospel is not interested in survival that costs us our soul. So Jesus prays, and then he calls with a loud voice: “Lazarus, come out!” And Lazarus comes out! But he comes out bound.

Hands and feet wrapped. Face covered. Alive, but constrained. Resurrected, but still carrying the evidence of the grave. And that’s when Jesus gives the command that is at the heart of this sermon, maybe at the heart of our calling: “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Jesus does not say, “Lazarus, unbind yourself.” He does not say, “If Lazarus really wanted to be free, he’d figure it out.” He does not say, “Lazarus needs to pull himself up by his bootstraps.” He turns to the community. Because unbinding is communal work.

¹ <https://inthesetimes.com/article/freedom-grief-healing-death-liberation-movements>

This is where the gospel confronts one of the most seductive idols of our time: individualism. The lie that says you are on your own. The lie that says your pain is your private problem. The lie that says needing others is weakness. The lie that says the only people worth saving are the ones who can save themselves.

But the story of Lazarus teaches us that resurrection creates responsibility. If someone is coming out of the tomb, the community has to be ready to do the patient, close-up, sometimes messy work of unwrapping what death has bound them with.

And we know what that work looks like. Sometimes it looks like showing up after a funeral and bringing food when words fail. Sometimes it looks like calling the person who's gone quiet and saying, "I'm not going anywhere." Sometimes it looks like sitting with someone in their anger without trying to manage it.

Sometimes it looks like helping someone navigate systems designed to bind them: poverty, debt, addiction, shame, incarceration, isolation, racism, ableism; grave clothes that cling to bodies long after the worst has happened. And sometimes it looks like something as ordinary and holy as forty people gathering around an organizing meal of chili and cornbread; a stubborn, embodied declaration that we will feed each other, and we will not let each other disappear.

Because community is not a bonus feature of faith. Community is how God unbinds. "Unbind him, and let him go." That command is not only about Lazarus. It is about us. Who in our life is trying to come out of a tomb, but can't quite move because they are still wrapped up? Who is suffocating under the cloth of loneliness? Who is stuck in cycles that smell like death? Who is one brave step into healing, but still needs someone to help with the bindings?

And here's the harder question: Where are you still bound? Where have you come out...alive, technically alive...but still wrapped in the grave's habits and fears? Because the good news is not that you should be ashamed of those bindings. The good news is that Jesus does not treat them as your private failure. He treats them as the community's call.

We are meant to be the kind of church where people can come out still wrapped up, and not be stared at, not be judged, not be hurried, just unbound. Patiently. Gently. Together.

Now, as we get closer to Easter, we feel the pull to skip ahead. We want the sunrise. We want the alleluias. We want the rolled-away stone and the empty clothes neatly folded and the certainty that everything turns out fine.

We're already making our plans. We're already imagining April road trips and warmer days. Maybe we're already picturing the Blue Ridge Parkway, the way spring insists on returning, the way the world can look newly made. And that longing is not wrong.

But the gospel asks us to hold the tension. Because before there is an empty tomb, there is a tomb that stinks. Before there is resurrection joy, there are tears on God's face. Before there is "He is risen," there is "He wept." And the promise is not that we will never enter the valley. The promise is that God's breath also enters the valley.

Ezekiel stands among the bones, and God asks, "Can these bones live?" And the honest answer is: not by themselves. Dry bones don't resurrect by positive thinking. Tombs don't open by polite denial. We don't unbind ourselves by sheer willpower.

But God's Spirit, God's breath, can do what we cannot. Breath can enter what is dried out. Breath can animate what is scattered. Breath can turn a valley of dry and hopeless bones into a people.

So today we do not pretend that death is not real. We name it. We smell it. We grieve it. And we also refuse to let it have the final word. We will wait for the Lord, more than those who keep watch for the morning. We will keep watch, not with numbness, but with prayer. Not with denial, but with tears. Not alone, but together.

And when someone comes stumbling out of the dark, still wrapped up in what tried to kill them, we will not say, "Good luck with that." We will do what Jesus tells us to do. We will unbind. And we will let them go. Amen.