

A Sermon for Lent 5 2023  
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Imagine it: everywhere you look there are skeletons scattered across a valley, grass growing between the ribs. My mind goes to what could have created such a ghastly scene—a pandemic? a climate that became unlivable? The only comfort is that whatever disaster happened was a long time ago because the bones have been there long enough to be very dry.

Now imagine you're Ezekiel and God has just told you to prophesy that these bones will live. Can you imagine how ridiculous that seems? How completely impossible? These aren't just dead bodies; they are the very last remains of bodies that have been dead for a *very* long time. Their flesh is gone. They are long past resuscitation. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.'

Another sorry scene greets us in today's Gospel reading. Martha and Mary's dear brother Lazarus has died and Jesus has missed his chance to say goodbye. The social mores of the time said that if a friend was close enough to be invited to attend to a person's death that it was offensive to then not come. Yet Jesus does just that. He waits when he hears that Lazarus is sick and shows up finally after he has been dead four days. He isn't just dead; he's *very* dead.

The disciples can't understand why he's going back at all. Why are any of these people important enough to Jesus to risk going back to Judea where he knows there are folks ready to see him killed? But Jesus has other ideas and makes his way, finally, to Bethany.

In the honor-based culture in which Jesus lived, it was shameful for women to be assertive. But Martha meets Jesus on the road and then Mary does the same. Martha and Mary going up and talking intimately with a highly-respected man like Jesus, despite them being friends, could have been seen as an affront to Jesus' honor, his social status in the community. But Jesus does not treat the interactions with Mary and Martha as an affront. He shows that he loves and cares about them. It may seem like a small thing in our time, but in Jesus' time and place it was turning the social order upside down.

Jesus talks with Martha and Mary, with women who are especially vulnerable because they have just lost their closest male relative. As far as we are told, neither of them are married, which makes them not only second-class citizens, but third-class. Jesus weeps with these women. Meanwhile, the disciples are confused and not understanding what's going on, but Jesus takes the time to talk to each of these women individually and hear what they have to say about this huge event that has happened in their lives—the death of their brother. Martha's confession of faith is a powerful contrast to the disciples' misgivings. She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Jesus, in a deeply patriarchal society, says the needs of women matter. He shows it by his actions. Including the action of saving them from the social stigma of being without a close male relative by raising their brother Lazarus from the dead.

I fear that in The Episcopal Church we can become complacent regarding the status of women. We think that now that women are allowed to be ordained to both the diaconate and the priesthood in our church that our work is done. Now that we've had women as bishops and even as presiding bishop that we're good. But I'm here to tell you that we've got a lot more work to do. There are plenty of examples of how we need to continue to let the influence of women's authentic voices pervade the structures of our church to make it truly equal. One example is the way our liturgical language still uses almost exclusively masculine images to talk about God. We won't be truly equal until the structures change because of the influence of women, not simply allowing women into inflexible structures that require us to change to fit.

The same goes for people of color of LGBTQ folks. Our struggles for justice and equity are interrelated. The logic that says that women must remain in strictly prescribed gender roles is the same logic that tells LGBTQ folks that they can't love who they love or be who they want to be or that people of color mustn't step out of their place. They rely on the idea that only one kind of person is worthy of all the benefits of being human. And some are bold enough to say that that othering is God-ordained.

We are seeing a moral panic all around us that targets people who break the gender binary that Jesus, Martha, and Mary are breaking in our Gospel lesson today. Some conservative politicians are claiming the authority of God and saying that LGBTQ folk, especially trans folk, are not allowed in public spaces or to be around children. They are using the language of faith to say that our siblings are not welcome and that those who are not yet out should have no hope of growing publicly into their true selves. They are putting our siblings in the position where they will feel, like the dry bones, "cut off completely" from their community and themselves.

As Christians who see their faith as loving, liberating, and life-giving, we must take a moral stand against this injustice happening all around us. And for those of us who aren't LGBTQ or trans, we must resist the flesh's reflex to see something we don't understand and view it with suspicion.

Just now, when I said "the flesh", I was quoting Paul in Romans. Growing up this passage from Romans was used against me, as a way to say that my body's wisdom as a woman was not valid. That I should question myself if I felt in my bones that something was wrong when it was what the people around me said was right. But I recently heard someone frame this text in a new way. They said that "the flesh" in this passage doesn't mean your body or its wisdom, rather "it is one of Paul's favorite metaphors for the deeply-rooted, socially-conditioned worldview we inherit from our upbringing." So when you see something you don't understand and are suspicious before you even consciously process it, that's the flesh. When you see an ambitious woman or other marginalized person and think, "they just rub me the wrong way," that's the flesh. When you see a dark-skinned person you don't know and get a tinge of fear, that's the flesh. In that sense, I see the flesh at work all over the moral panic happening around us. That is not the Spirit, that is the flesh. In this case, I agree with Paul that "the flesh is death, but the Spirit is life and peace."

Now, back to the story from the beginning: You already know the end! Like Jesus raises Lazarus and is later himself raised, Ezekiel prophesies at God's command and sees the bones gain muscles, tendons, organs, skin, and breathe the breath of life. May we believe in miracles and see the vision of a new future of wholeness and hope for all. Amen.