

“The Work that is Ours To Do” by Marjory Zoet Bankson

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Fifth Sunday of Lent

Last weekend, Judy Lantz and I represented Seekers at the Church of the Saviour discernment retreat at Wellspring. On Saturday, Cheryl Hellner led us in two sessions of gathered silence. She began by saying that, during Lent, she had “apprenticed herself” to the pair of bald eagles nesting at the National Arboretum. On a low altar in the center of our 23-person circle was an empty bird nest placed carefully on a hand-crocheted prayer shawl. For me it became the image of our work.

Bald eagles mate for life and they return to the same nest, year after year. This pair has used the same large flat nest at the arboretum for the past three years, so you can watch their activities LIVE from two hidden cameras. Like some other large birds, eagles share time on the nest, alternating the incubation duties with foraging for food. During the recent ice storm, Cheryl watched late into the night as one of them, covered with snow, clung to the nest and sheltered their two eggs in high winds. Their task, she reminded us, was to “shelter the possibility of new life.”

That was our work too, as communities within Church of the Saviour. We seem to be at a critical point of deciding what “the tradition of Church of the Saviour” means to us now. What is the new life that we are sheltering?

You may remember that eagles were nearly wiped out by our use of DDT for pest control. If Rachel Carson had not written “Silent Spring” back in 1962, and we had not embraced the

dangers of extinguishing whole species of life on our planet, we would not be watching this daily miracle of new life today. Now, threats to the Environmental Protection Agency put that responsibility back onto caring citizens again. A new generation needs to become vigilant and amazed, awestruck by God's message as it is woven into the natural world. As our theme for this season asks, "Is God with us? Is God for us?"

This week, Peter and I watched as first one chick, and then yesterday, a second chick hatched in that nest – clumsy and naked compared to the first chick, which is already an adorable ball of fluff with a wide-open beak. The second chick would struggle a bit, and then rest; struggle a bit and then rest. From time to time, the yellow beak of its mother or father would appear on camera, curious enough to lift away a bit of shell but not to interfere or remove the shell prematurely. The struggle was apparently necessary and the clinging shell still useful. And because I've been working on this sermon all week, I saw it through the lens of the Lazarus story.

Traditionally, the story of Lazarus has been seen as a story of Jesus' close friendship with Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus, "whom Jesus loved." It's the only time "Jesus wept." That's one interpretation. More recently, scholars have made a big distinction between raising Lazarus as an act of resuscitation, and the more spiritual resurrection of Jesus. But I want to suggest a slightly different perspective – that resurrection happens to all of us if we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear.

It seems to me that the Gospels portray Jesus as one who brings new life in a culture of deadness: he heals the sick, brings sight to the blind, makes the lame walk and invites his disciples to a new purpose for their lives without regard for privilege or status. At every turn, Jesus stepped away from the culture of violence and brutality that the Roman Empire exercised. His nonviolent confrontation with the powers of

death and dehumanization happens again and again, in many different settings – at the temple and on the road, in the marketplace and at the table. Even when he was threatened with physical death, Jesus spoke without fear or anger. The threat of physical death seemed to have no power over him although he did flee Jerusalem to avoid death when the time was not yet ripe for it.

The story of Lazarus begins away from Jerusalem, where he was relatively safe. Then Jesus is summoned by Mary and Martha because Lazarus is very ill. Because they lived in Bethany, not far from Jerusalem, the disciples knew that Jesus would once again be in danger of arrest. When he finally does decide to go, Thomas (the same one who would later doubt the resurrection appearance of Jesus) says despairingly, “We might as well go with him to die there.”

But it’s not clear that the disciples do accompany Jesus to Bethany. We don’t hear another word about them until the banquet following Lazarus’ release from the tomb. I think Jesus probably went alone, which may have emboldened Martha, and then Mary, as they scolded him for not coming sooner. Their interchange sounds personal to me.

John Dear, the Jesuit peace activist and biblical scholar, claims this story of Lazarus as the KEY to the Gospel of John and to nonviolent confrontation with the powers of death. John Dear suggests that Lazarus represents the whole culture of violence, death and bondage. He boils this story down to three basic commands: Roll away the stone; Lazarus, come forth; and Unbind him. Let’s look at each command as a separate step toward resurrection here and now.

Roll Away the Stone

When Jesus and Martha approach the tomb, apparently accompanied by the usual crowd of official mourners, Jesus commands them to roll away the stone which seals the opening.

Martha voiced her practical advice against it, pointing out that the body would be putrid after four days. By this point, Martha seems to have given up her trust that Jesus could miraculously save Lazarus. Although she claimed belief in resurrection at some future time, it was clearly NOT NOW. Like some of us, her faith in resurrection seems limited to an afterlife. [pause]

But Jesus persists. He does not roll the stone away for her. The work must be done by Martha and others who are willing to face the stench of long-dead life.

We also know the stink, as well as the pleasure, of life on this planet. We've all got small or large parts of our lives that make us vulnerable to fear – or the threat of violence. Who doesn't have "dead bodies" that we've walled away in a cave? Who doesn't have an alcoholic mother or absent father, a childhood trauma or a chronic condition – something that makes us special or isolates us from others. Who hasn't made shameful choices or maybe lazy excuses instead. That's what gives the state its power – our fear of death, or decrepitude, or simply discomfort. As Americans, we have been seduced by the huckster's promise of an easy life – and we resist giving up our illusion of control. Sometimes these fears show up as excessive attention to our health or physical fitness. Or maybe a kind of perfectionism that blocks the normal limits of our humanity, or keeps us awake at night. We might notice the symptoms of excess first, and then explore "the stench" that is sealed behind the behavior. Whatever it is, Jesus will not "save us" from having to do the work of rolling away the stone.

Think of what it would be like to live without fear – as Jesus apparently did. Imagine, for a minute, what your body would feel like – to live without fear. [deep breath] When does your body feel that way? Could that be a guide to call?

Deciding to roll away the stone may take us into a 12-step

program, or to a spiritual director, or commitment to really show up for a mission group. Worship itself can help us roll away the stone – the deeper meaning of “liturgy” is “the work of the people.” Prayers, music, scripture, communion, even a casual conversation can unseal the tomb. And even if you are fairly happy with your life as it is, life has a way of giving us new opportunities to discover the gifts and the wounds that we have buried, unaware that Jesus can bring resurrection here and now.

“Roll away the stone,” Jesus said to Martha and the other mourners, and so they did the preliminary work themselves.

Lazarus, come forth!

In the middle of Martha’s disbelief and fear of the stench of death, Jesus calls out to Lazarus: Come out! Be alive! Stand up and walk! If we are pushing and shoving to roll away the stone, it’s easy to forget that it is God who brings new life. It is Jesus who calls Lazarus from the tomb, not his sister or his friends. We do not have the power to do this ourselves. Here’s where our trust and faith in the power of God are crucial.

I’ve spent most of my adult life thinking about God’s call and how that brings us to life. Maybe that was shaped by my first experience of call coming when I was a teenager, practicing the organ in a mortuary. I was literally in the presence of people who were not only dead but embalmed and lying in a casket. They were REALLY dead. And the contrast, for me, was the aliveness I felt as I was making music. Practicing there quickened my blood, made me glad to be alive. I can remember humming as I played, glad that nobody could hear me.

Does that mean I should be a professional musician? Absolutely not! I clearly didn’t have that level of skill. But it does mean that music was and is an important element for my well-being, my aliveness – and I have largely walled that gift away

in a cave, because I think that I'm not good enough to justify the time that I would need to practice in order to enjoy making music alone or with others. I confess that I've bought into the cultural view that skill equals God's blessing. It's a false premise! The yardstick needs to be what brings me alive.

As you may know, Peter and I are sorting through 40 years of accumulation in our house in preparation for a move in May to be closer to Seekers. About a month ago, I pulled my father's violin out from under the bed. The case was covered with dust, and inside, I found that a small crack had developed where the chinrest was attached. It's been 60 years since I played this violin, and 50 since I played a borrowed violin in the Fairbanks orchestra. I felt terribly guilty about not taking better care of the violin, but then something Marcia said about having her grandmother's cello rehabbed gave me the courage to take my violin in for repair.

When the repairman at Fox's Music Store opened the case, he recognized the violin maker and fervently urged me to have it repaired. It would take several weeks, he said. Something about his response gave me hope that my love for this instrument could be rekindled, and I've been practicing on "the loaner" that he gave me ever since. I know that a wellspring of joy has been tapped, and amid the grief and loss involved with sorting thru the things we have accumulated over the years, my 30 minutes of daily practice on the violin is a respite, a well of living water, a sacred space to be a beginner again.

Beyond the guilt that sealed that tomb of "not good enough" lay joy and pleasure, waiting to be called to life. I'm grateful and glad to let the call to new life reverberate in that dark chamber. This week, every time I started to practice, I heard, "Marjory, come forth!"

Unbind him

Too often, we forget about the third command, “unbind him,” because it is directed at the community and not at us. Wherever there is new life, it may come wrapped in the gravecloths of old wounds and old habits. It is the surrounding community of people who can help us untangle the stories by deep listening, and unwrap the habits that keep us tied to old ways of coping IF we allow it.

12-steppers know that regular confession is good for healing old wounds and discovering new places for growth. Mission group members here at Seekers can let the community practice of writing spiritual reports be another way to unbind each other. We can also choose to let our conversations be honest, truthful and intentional about that spiritual work of unbinding one another.

There is a big difference between trying to fix other people into the image of who we want them to be – and recognizing the loose end of a gravecloth when it’s handed to you for unbinding. If the impulse to correct or comment on somebody else’s behavior starts with you, it’s probably better to keep that advice to yourself. But if someone asks for time to share a bit of their own story, it might well be a way to unbind a bit of new life. Once you become conscious of the difference, it’s fairly easy to tell where the impulse comes from.

As the spiritual director in Learners & Teachers, I feel humbled by the trust that our weekly spiritual reports hold for this process of community unbinding. Over the years, I have come to understand this role as a witness to resurrection as it happens in the most intimate and often hidden parts of our lives. For me, that is the best part of our Church of the Saviour tradition: honoring the “inward journey” as the foundation for our “journey outward” toward nonviolent action for peace and justice.

Conclusion

Too often we ourselves regard these small openings to be insignificant or unworthy of somebody else's attention. But they are not. Every stone that gets rolled away is worth the effort. Every tomb emptied is worth celebrating!

The best news is that we don't have to do this alone. Others can help us do the work of rolling aside the boulders that are wedged in tightly by our culture and by our expectations of how we think life ought to be. Rolling away that stone can let us smell the reality of what is, and open us to the reality that God can and does bring new life, again and again. I believe that the resurrection is NOT just about Jesus and the special events that we celebrate at Easter. Resurrection can be practiced again and again, throughout our lives. As a friend of mine says, "Easter celebrates one Jesus, and many Christs."

New life is always a miracle! This week, we saw new life hatching with a struggle in the eagle's nest. This week, we remembered the inward journey as a central part of being "in the tradition of Church of the Saviour." This week, we heard the Lazarus story with new ears:

To the community, Jesus said "Roll away the stone;

To Lazarus, God called, "come forth from your tomb of fear and death;"

To the community, Jesus commanded "Unbind him and set him free."

Is God with us? Is God for us?

May it be so for each one of us today.

Amen.