Dreaming Beyond the Boundaries

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John 11:1-45

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One of the things that has been getting me through this pandemic is the abundant sharing of memes. You know, those little pictures with funny sayings on them that get passed around online? Many of the memes are based on truths that people have learned about themselves or observed in the midst of this pandemic.

One of my favorites has been one that just says, “Honestly hadn’t planned on giving up quite this much for Lent.” Another says, “This is the Lentiest Lent I ever Lented.”

I find it so interesting that this pandemic is happening during Lent and not during a different liturgical season. Because it is Lent, our lectionary texts have a certain focus and message. Can you imagine how differently we would experience other texts if we were in a different season? Can you imagine how differently we would hear the Advent texts in the midst of a pandemic? Perhaps it would give us a different understanding of what Immanuel — God with us, might mean.

Or in summer, in Ordinary Time, when we get to explore other stories that perhaps aren’t as well known to us. How would we receive those texts? I mean, I love Balaam’s donkey — an Old Testament story in which God gives an abused donkey a voice — and I hope one day to get to preach on that story, but if it were today’s text, my heart just wouldn’t be in it. I think Lenten texts are what we need right now. I think it is *because* of our current situation *right now* that we should really dwell, reside in these Lenten texts and listen for the promise and hope we find in them.

Our lectionary texts recently have felt extra-raw, extra-close, and extra-true. When I first read today’s options, to pick out my text for the sermon, my first reaction was a mix between deep groaning and cringing laughter. The Old Testament text for today is the famous “Dry Bones” text from Ezekiel. One of the verses in it says, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” I can appreciate that feeling.

Both the Epistle and the Psalm selections deal with despair and loss and crying out to God for help. Who can’t relate to that these days?

And then we get to today’s Gospel text about death and resurrection and tears.

Our texts during Lent often force us to consider our humanity and the hope for resurrection that Easter brings, but in the midst of a pandemic, I find myself clinging to texts that at first glance, I want to keep at arm’s length.

The Lazarus text from John is perhaps one that is very familiar to us. We often refer to it as “The Raising of Lazarus,” even though that event doesn’t happen until the second to last verse. The raising of Lazarus is important; in fact it is the pivotal moment in John’s gospel which leads directly to Jesus’s arrest. But in referring to it as the “Raising of Lazarus,” we often forget some of the other, equally compelling parts. As Gail O’Day notes in her commentary on John, it takes Jesus 43 verses to actually raise Lazarus and so we “ought not to arrive at Lazarus’s tomb any faster than Jesus does.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

So let’s dive in and see what happens leading up to Lazarus’s resurrection. The text begins with Jesus receiving a message from Mary and her sister, Martha, telling Jesus that their brother, Lazarus, was gravely ill. Instead of traveling immediately to see him, Jesus waits a couple days, during which, Lazarus dies.

As is usual with John, there are a few misunderstandings in this story. Namely, that everyone who grieves the death of Lazarus (except for Jesus), is restricted by their human understandings of death. They have never seen anyone who has died come back to life. They believed that there would be an eventual resurrection of the dead on the “last day” as Martha tells Jesus, but for them on that particular day in Bethany, they had no expectations that their brother would be returned to them.

After all, he hadn’t only died, he’d been dead for four days already. There was a Jewish understanding that the soul lingers near the body for three days after death before completing its journey from life to death. For everyone gathered, this was a boundary that could not be crossed. This was final.

The tomb that Lazarus lay in was his final resting place. Or so they thought.

Or so, perhaps, we still think today.

Perhaps this text invites us to consider life beyond the boundaries of what we think we know. Perhaps Jesus is inviting the disciples and us, to imagine together, what miracles might abound in the upside down world of the Kingdom of God.

Valarie Kaur, a lawyer and documentary filmmaker, was the keynote speaker at the Montreat College Conference a few years ago. She talked about growing up as a Sikh in the United States, coming of age right around 9/11. She told us about the numbers of attacks on American Sikhs in mis-directed anger. In fact, the Sikh Coalition documented over 300 cases of violence and discrimination against Sikh Americans in the first month following 9/11.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Kaur spoke to us about that time in her life and the lives of her faith community. She considered it to be a very dark time. But then she told us about giving birth to her first child. She described her experience, her fear, her fatigue and exhaustion. When she was at the point where she didn’t think she could continue, a midwife grabbed her hand, and told her to breathe, and then push. Breathe, and then push. She closed her eyes, breathed, and pushed, and out of that agony of pain and fear, her son was born.

Valarie Kaur closed her keynote that night in Montreat, by talking to us about darkness. She told us that in times when the world feels especially dark, when it feels like we’ve been entombed and can’t escape, what if we viewed that darkness differently? What if it’s not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the *womb* and the world is ready to be born…into something new and beautiful? What if the world is asking us to breathe, and then to push, and to help usher in something wonderful, new, beyond the scope of our imaginations?

Valarie’s “breathe, then push” mantra became my mantra that night.

I was living in Memphis at the time, loving my jobs there, but feeling like I was in limbo. I had graduated from seminary but was not eligible to be ordained yet. Far away from my family, but knowing that I had to do these three years in Memphis.

One of the biggest obstacles to ordination would turn out to be my chaplain residency at the VA in Memphis. It was not a pleasant experience. I was out of place. As a female, I wasn’t welcome in many patients’ rooms. I received very little support from the head chaplain. I felt trapped in that building with no windows to the outside.

One day, I got home from another agonizing overnight shift and I had a package waiting for me. It was from my sister. She had also been in Anderson Auditorium that night at Montreat, listening to Valarie Kaur’s keynote. In the package was a drawing she had commissioned my best friend from seminary to make. In beautiful shades of turquoise and blue, my friend Allison had written these words: “Breathe, then push.”

I hung the art on my wall and looked at it every time I was overwhelmed or despairing. Breathe, then push. The darkness of the womb, not the tomb. I would look at the imperative, “breathe, then push,” and think about what I was working toward — ordination and new life.

When I think back on that time in the VA, it’s still not a pleasant memory. I still have anger about that experience. But if opting out of that experience meant that I wouldn’t get to be your associate pastor here in Staunton today, I would do 3 more units of chaplaincy.

I didn’t know Covenant at the time. I had barely heard of Staunton. But during that chaplaincy unit, I began to pray for the congregation that would call me. It was one of the only ways I could find peace in what I was doing. Breathe, then push. Pray for this unknown congregation. Breathe, then push.

Transformation is not without pain. We are never promised a life without pain.

But today’s Gospel text tells us that we are not in this transformational darkness alone. In today’s story, Mary and Martha, in their grief are surrounded by people — by friends and neighbors who grieve alongside them. When Mary goes out of her house, she is followed by fellow Jews who go to grieve at Lazarus’s tomb with her. She is never alone.

But there is one more person who will join the sisters in their grief — Jesus. And when Jesus’s heart breaks open that day, it is God’s heart breaking open, too.

Verse 33 tells us that when Jesus sees Mary weeping, and the Jews who were grieving alongside her weeping, he became disturbed in spirit and deeply moved and begins to weep. The word in Greek can also mean to “groan in spirit.” The anguish that Jesus feels goes beyond just a few tears, it is a full embodiment of grief.

John’s gospel is know for its high Christology — Jesus’s divinity, his one-ness with God, is emphasized more in John’s Gospel than in any of the others. But it’s in this moment right here, that we see the ultimate example of Jesus’s full humanity. It tells us that in our weeping in and in our pain, God knows it, because God has been there alongside us in our pain.

American composer William Billings and lyricist Perez Morton put the famous shortest verse in the Bible - Jesus Wept - to music and wrote the beloved hymn, “When Jesus Wept.”

The lyrics are few, but they are powerful.

“When Jesus wept, the falling tear

in mercy flowed beyond all bound.

When Jesus groaned, a trembling fear

seized all the guilty world around.”

The Hymn Society wrote about the hymn this week noting, “Just as Jesus wept for his friend Lazarus, so too does God weep with those who suffer and grieve. Just as Jesus groaned at the tomb, so too does God groan with the Spirit that brings life to dry bones.”

We are in pain right now. We are feeling trapped — some of us literally! We feel like we are in that tomb with Lazarus and that this loneliness, isolation, fear for ourselves, fear for our family and friends, fear of the unknown is forever. We are unable to dream beyond the boundaries enforced on us right now.

But this pandemic will not be forever. At some point, we will emerge from our homes and apartments and assisted living facilities. Like Lazarus, we will leave the darkness behind. We will take off our sweatpants and pajamas and venture back out into the world.

When that happens we will need to make a decision. Was the past few weeks or months the darkness of a tomb or of a womb? How will we be transformed in this moment? How is God calling us to be transformed?

A poem that I’ve seen floating around during this Lenten pandemic season alongside all the memes talks about what will happen in the after.

It says,

“When this is over,

may we never again

take for granted

a handshake with a stranger

Full shelves at the store

Conversations with neighbors

A crowded theater

Friday night out

The taste of communion

A routine checkup

The school rush each morning

Coffee with a friend

The stadium roaring

Each deep breath

A boring Tuesday

Life itself.

When this ends,

may we find

that we have become

more like the people

we wanted to be

we were called to be

we hoped to be

and may we stay

that way—better

for each other

because of the worst.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Friends, may this darkness we feel, transform us into a more united body of Christ, ready to be Christ’s transformational hands and feet in this hurting world.

When we’re ready, let us breathe, then push.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. Gail R. O’Day and Susan E. Hylen - John. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/images/documents/fact%20sheet%20on%20hate%20against%20sikhs%20in%20america%20post%209-11%201.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Laura Kelly Fanucci “When This Is Over” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)