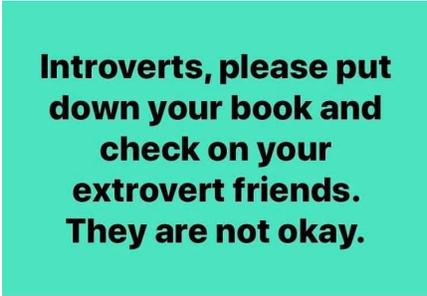


Unbind Us

I am an energetic extrovert. I thrive on action, relationship, and problem-solving. I draw energy from one-on-one conversation, light-hearted banter, story sharing, and moving about in this vast and wonderful world. Giving up these things this Lent has been unbelievably hard for me. My favorite meme these days reads:



**Introverts, please put
down your book and
check on your
extrovert friends.
They are not okay.**

This week, this meme has hit home. All this staying home is not okay. Physical distancing – not okay. The anxiety I sense in family and friends – not okay. The growing number of under- and unemployed people in our communities – not okay. The effects of this pandemic on my next door neighbor’s restaurant (and countless others like it) – not ok. The news of insufficient respirators, personal protective equipment, and increasing deaths throughout the world – none of it is okay. Tuesday night this past week, I was awake all night covered up in the weight of this pandemic, the

pain of so many people. Wednesday was one of the hardest days I've ever experienced, with waves of grief crashing over me hour after hour. "Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord."

I know I'm not alone in feeling overwhelmed by the state of the world. And I know we extroverts aren't the only ones who are "not okay." This week as I've connected with you by phone, email and in prayer, I've felt the hand of the Lord upon me, setting me down in the middle of a valley, and I've heard – as Ezekiel heard – the house of God saying, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."

Ezekiel was a prophet who, like Isaiah and Jeremiah before him, prophesied to God's people that their collective sins would incur God's judgment. He called them to repent – to reconcile with God. When Jerusalem fell to Babylon, Ezekiel and other Jewish leaders were deported (the working class was left behind to work the land). From Babylon, he had a devastating vision in which God left the Temple, the place where God was said to dwell among God's people. Twelve years later, Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and deported a second wave of exiles.¹ This is the

¹ The destruction of the Temple is recorded in Ezekiel 33:21-22.

context of our passage today: God's people have sinned and broken their covenant with God. They're in exile in a foreign land, God has left the Temple, and now the Temple is destroyed. The place where they would have gone to repent – to reconcile with God – no longer exists. The place they would have gone to reconcile with God is gone. The wages of sin is death, and they are dead in their sins and there's nothing they can do to save themselves. "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."

"Mortal," God asks the prophet, "can these bones live?"

If I were standing there, I'd be inclined to say no. Ezekiel wisely replies, "O Lord God, you know." Then God gives the prophet a breathtaking instruction – to tell the bones:

I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

If you've ever wondered what grace is, you have only to turn to this passage. Out of the death of their sins, when there is nothing God's people can do to save themselves, God acts. God restores – recreates – life. And notice that God's restoration is of *the community as a whole*.

In our Gospel text today, we hear of another restoration of life involving the whole community. The chapter begins: “A certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany.” There’s so much we could talk about in this reading, but I want to focus on three things.

First, there’s no suggestion that Lazarus’ illness and subsequent death is – in any way – the result of sin. Ezekiel prophesied to a community of living people whose exile in Babylon resulted from their sin and *felt* like death. Here, Lazarus died – just as all of us eventually will.

Second, we need to listen fully to Jesus’ conversation with Martha. Notice that when Jesus says to her, “your brother will rise again,” she “hears only the promise of a future resurrection.” You can hear it in her response: “I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”² In his response, Jesus focuses her not on the future but on the present: “I am the resurrection *and* the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” They’ll live. When Jesus speaks of living in the Gospel of John, he’s not talking about a day in the distant future when we will rise from the dead and finally be able to live as God really intended. In John’s

² I am grateful to Karoline Lewis’ “Commentary on John 11:1-45” for this perspective. For her full commentary, see https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=42.

Gospel, when Jesus speaks of life, he offer resurrection and life right here, right now. Just a few verses before our passage today, Jesus says: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Abundant, joyful, life is available now and will endure forever, even after death, for those who believe. In his death on the cross, Jesus will defeat death – take away its sting ... it’s power over life. In bringing Lazarus out of the tomb, Jesus demonstrates this to Martha, Mary, and all who are gathered.

Which brings me to my third observation. Look how John describes the scene after Jesus calls, “Lazarus, come out.” He tells us “the *dead man* came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped.” He’s moving, but he’s still a dead man. He’s still bound up in the garb of death. Jesus then addresses his community, saying: “Unbind him, and let him go.” Jesus’ action of raising Lazarus to abundant, joyful life filled with love is completed by the community’s work of unbinding him.

Friends, as I speak with you, we are in a sort of self-imposed exile, entombed – in a way – in our homes. Now, let me be clear, I do not believe that this pandemic is the result of sin. That’s not where I’m going

here at all. And yet, my ears are ringing with our collective cries: “our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost!” Many of us – dare I say, all of us – experience moments in which we are bound up in the garb of death: fear, anxiety, and solitude. That feeling we have in the pit of our stomachs, it’s the binding pull of grief. Because none of this is okay.

Last week, Father Casey urged us to look for Jesus. Through our Scriptures today, I see Jesus – standing outside the tombs of our fears and sorrows – weeping as we do for all who are sick – for all who have died in the world around us. To Father Casey’s call to look for Jesus, I will add: listen to Jesus. He is calling each of us by name:

David, come out!

Casey, come out!

Joel, come out!

And he is calling us as a community to the work of unbinding one another.

This week, as I’ve heard Jesus calling, “Rebecca, come out” and fumbled forward in my bindings, I’ve been grateful to members of my communities – the prayer community, the meme community, our medical communities, my family – who have worked together to unbind me.

When you find yourself bound up this week, I hope you'll listen to Jesus calling you to come out. I hope you'll take a few steps by phone, text, or email out of the tomb of your anxiety and fear toward your community. Because, when you do we will work together to unbind you. Then when you've come unbound, I hope you'll listen to Jesus saying to you, "Unbind him and let him go. Unbind her and let her go."

Who will you unbind this week?