

St. Paul's Congregational Church
 April 2, 2017, John 11:1-45 – Lent 5A
 The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Every once in a while, I want to spend time in a cave. When I get overwhelmed by things to do, the frustration of daily living, the pain or worry about circumstances in my own life or in lives of people around me, the constant bad news in the world, everything just piles up and I want to go away for a while into a quiet, dark place and regroup. I'll resist efforts from friends to pull me out of that cave – the feelings of sadness, powerlessness, hopelessness, disconnection from life – can be overwhelming and I get stuck. Have you ever felt that way?

I am a believer that we all need to take times to go into a cave and regroup but staying in there for an extended time isn't healthy, is it. The darkness can overcome us and there we stay, wanting to be restored but unable to do it, to step out, on our own. And I think that's also true for communities as well – both we as individuals and we as community can retreat into caves and resist change or growth, resist restoration because it's unfamiliar, uncomfortable, even frightening. Or maybe we're stuck in our routines, not aware of how stuck we really are.

A business man says, his biggest challenge is to get his people to want to be a success. What did he mean by that? He explained, new customers require more work. It's much easier just to keep house, to go into a cave, in the company, to keep old customers happy rather than get to know new customers. You will find, he says, despite what they claim, many businesses today develop a prejudice against new customers. Success in business can be a pain in the neck.

When I read this story, I couldn't help but substitute "members of the congregation" for customers. Church for business. We go into keep house mode, into a cave too, don't we?

Being stuck in a cave can be comfortable, familiar, safe. But it also sucks the life right out of us. It creates despair, depression, hopelessness. Extended time in a cave is a form of death – sin – separation from God and from each other. When we stay in the cave, there's no room for the Spirit of Life to reach us. When we stay in the cave, there's no room for that peace that passes all understanding. And there's certainly no room for joy.

We can be restored though – there is hope. There is hope for us – as individuals and as community – if we are faithful, if we are centered, if we'll take the risk. And this vision of hope for revival comes from God's word and spirit alone. Hearing these stories such as Lazarus' resurrection during Lent helps us to stop and examine whether we are living according to the spirit or not – and as we are yet again reminded that God's spirit is the only, true source of life.

Jesus is told that his friend Lazarus in Bethany is sick. But he does not go there for two more days. When he approaches Bethany, Martha, one of Lazarus' sisters, meets him and tells him he is too late – that Lazarus is dead. Jesus tells her that her brother will

live again because he, Jesus, is the resurrection and the life. Those who believe, even if they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Familiar words to us aren't they – spoken at nearly every funeral. Words of comfort – do we believe them? Are they enough to bring us out of our caves?

Jesus is visibly moved – when he asks where Lazarus has been buried, Martha says, come and see and Jesus begins to weep. We see the human side of Jesus as he mourns a good and old friend. And we also wonder, is he aware that the same thing will happen again to him in just a short time?

Martha's sister Mary – the one who anointed Jesus with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair – joins them along with a crowd of people. They all go to the tomb – to mourn they think. But they're about to be incredibly surprised by life. New life.

The tomb is a cave with a large stone in front of it – Jesus tells them to roll it away. And Martha and Mary do the risky thing – they act on faith, not on what they fear. Against common sense and their better judgment, they do what Jesus asks. In spite of the stench. They roll back the stone and the result is a miracle.

Jesus looks upward, thanks God for always hearing him. And he calls out – loudly – loudly enough for Lazarus to hear him – and loud enough for us to hear him – Lazarus – come out!

Lazarus comes out.

Here's the proof – Jesus is the resurrection and the life. And what happened this day is but a foreshadowing of the celebration over another empty tomb.

Lazarus comes out. Do we?

However, even though Lazarus has been given new life by Christ he's still wrapped and bound in his burial clothes. He's been raised from the dead but he can't walk around – he needs help moving out of the cave, moving out of his bondage - so Jesus says to the crowd gathered, to us: untie him and let him go!

Now, what does that tell us about the importance of community? What does that tell us about our responsibilities to God and each other? Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, but he can't truly live until the community steps in to help, to gather around him – in spite of the smell – to unwrap him and join him on the path toward restoration. We, too, must walk together as community so that there may be a resurrection into new life.

We, like the gathered crowd at Lazarus' tomb, have choices to make about how we get to Easter, to the path to new life. We can be restored by choosing to allow the Spirit of God to give us life. We can choose to live as Jesus lived. We can choose to live into our call to be a community of faith focused on the strength of our unity, even through our diversity. We can choose to give ourselves over to be restored by letting those things that separate us from God and each other die - and be resurrected in Spirit to life as faithful believers. We can let go and let God.

We've all come together on the path God has set before us – we've all come together in worship – a time of strengthening ourselves and each other. We're all taking the burial clothes off of each other –and if we take seriously our call to welcome everyone onto our faith journey, risky though it may be, well, we just might experience the miracle of what happens when we let Jesus in. New life. New energy. New creativity. New joy. For us as individuals. And for us as church – the Body of Christ.

William Willimon describes one church – there are dark hallways where children once hurried to their classes, now dusty, vacant. Empty pews staring back at the pulpit

even on Easter. Grass growing in the corners of the parking lot. The frantic search for some agency to rent unused space for a church now worried about keeping a roof over its head.

He describes a situation where a bishop sent a seminary graduate to her first assignment at this inner city church in decline for the last 20 years. Just keep it going as best you can, the bishop suggested. When she arrived at the church, she told the council that she thought she had a gift for working with children. “Then the bishop sent you to the wrong church” responded one of the women on the board, rather bluntly. “We are long past those years here.”

But then the creative winds started to blow – the breath of God that created, that enlivened the words and ministry of Jesus. The pastor found an old lady in the parish, Gladys, who used to play with Count Basie and the Dorsey brothers. She found two ladies to make peanut butter sandwiches. Then on Wednesday afternoon, the four of them rolled the old piano out of the double doors of the Fellowship Hall. Gladys sat down at the piano and began to play hits from the 30s, then some ragtime. By 3:30 a crowd of children had gathered. The pastor passed out the sandwiches. Gladys moved from “In the Mood” to “Jesus loves me.” She told them a story about a man named Jesus. And they clamored for more.

A year passed. Today, nearly 100 children crowd into that church every Wednesday afternoon. On Sunday, classes are full, taught by a group of older women who thought that they were now too old to have anything to do with children. And those children brought their parents.

New life in that old cave. New life not just for the church but for the people who had been waiting for the church to die. A miracle of restoration, of light coming into the darkness.

What burial cloths are we clinging to? Jesus has heard our cries – and is calling us forth to new life.

What if, what if, Lazarus, upon being given his new life, had said, “NO – I want these stinking, rotting rags to stay. I have become comfortable and accustomed to them.”

What would have happened? Well, he would have been alive, yes, but he wouldn’t have really lived. God has sent us new life too – let’s allow all those things that bind us – attitude, fear, prejudice, status quo, our routines, comfort: let us allow all of them to be removed by the work of the Holy Spirit. And let us celebrate and be surprised by this new life – experience the joy and peace that comes from life in the spirit – life that God wants for each one of us. Let’s experience the Easter moment right here, right now! Unbind those clothes and let them go! And as we begin to feel them loosen and fall away – we’ll come out of the cave and live! Live into the hope that Jesus promises! May it be so for each of us now and always. Amen.