



Come Out, Be Unbounded and Live



A Sermon By
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Grace Episcopal Church
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*An audio version of this sermon can be found on the Grace Church website at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2017-04-02-AAA.mp3>.*

The Rev. Amanda A. Akes
Grace Episcopal Church
The Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 2, 2017

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 130

Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45

May I speak to you in the name of the God of redemption, restoration, and resurrection. Amen.

A week and a half ago, my wife Sarah and I boarded a plane to Las Vegas. This was my first visit to Vegas and I wasn't quite sure what to expect. I was pleasantly surprised by our first day in the city. We watched the dancing fountains of the Bellagio, played a few slot machines, ate at a legendary Vegas buffet, and sipped a few adult beverages as we walked the strip (after all, you can do that there).

I enjoyed my introduction to Vegas. But it wasn't long before I found myself feeling a bit overwhelmed by the sheer opulence of the city – the vast extravagance, the lavish excessiveness, and eager abandon that seemed to possess everyone around us. I learned that there's some truth to Vegas' nickname, "Sin City."

As our time in Vegas progressed, I took in the people and situations around me. I noticed that some folks were at the same slot machines for extended periods of time. Other people couldn't drag themselves away from the dice and card games. And alcohol flowed like a river everywhere I turned. It was easy to fall into the culture of indulgence that the city exuded – to spend and spend until whatever desire possessed you was sated for the time being. The Vegas veneer is enticing, promising even. It has the power to allure and captivate. To make people forget about all else and submerge themselves into an oblivion of their choosing. It's like no other place I've been before.

And yet, there was something very familiar about the city. Vegas seemed to me a microcosm of human longing; a city of seekers yearning for something more, something nourishing and sustaining, something lasting. But that sort of thing isn't readily found in Sin City's proffered decadence. There are more distracting entertainments available.

My sojourn in Vegas reminded me anew that there is only one source of lasting fulfillment, one source of abundant life. That source is attested to in each of our readings this morning. Its spirit-bearing power brings life even to desolate valleys of dry bones and the comatose bodies of the dead. It liberates those that are bound. It breathes the breath of animation into the lifeless. It stirs hope where there is loss, transforming grief into joy. It enters into chaotic circumstances, into the rawness and realness of life. It doesn't shy away from the ugliness of reality, and brings with it, the potential for beauty and life abundant. Our scriptures today are chock-full of stories about this, our God, of redemption and restoration at work. They tell of God's past deeds and foreshadow the promise of God's future action in the lives of God's people.

Our reading from the book of Ezekiel portrays a dramatic event in which God brings life out of death. The people of Israel were living in hopelessness during a period of exile in Babylon. The Lord gave the Prophet Ezekiel a vision of dry, lifeless bones and commanded him to prophesy to the bones so that they might live again. When Ezekiel spoke as the Lord commanded him, the bones came together with sinews, flesh, and skin to cover them, “but there was no breath in them.” Then the prophet was commanded to call on the wind, or breath of God, “and the breath came into them, and they lived.”

The bones are a symbol of the nation that was dead and scattered by involuntary exile in Babylon. However, just as God could call together the parched bones and breathe life into them, so also could God bring new life to the nation of Israel and its people. This passage reminds us that the God of restoration would not abandon God’s people, but rather would re-establish them both to right relationship with God and to their homeland.

The God of restoration is at work again in our gospel narrative too, boldly proclaiming to be “the resurrection and the life.” Notice Jesus doesn’t say simply, “I am the resurrection” OR “I am the life,” he declares both of these truths. This is important because it reveals a lot about Jesus and the God that he proclaimed. When we think about the resurrection, we often think about it as a distant promise, our guarantee of salvation, our eternal life with God and Jesus in heaven. But what might it mean that Jesus is both the resurrection and that Jesus is the life?

I understand this statement to mean that we are raised to life, not only in a future salvific existence, but we are raised to life right now, right here, with Jesus. For Lazarus, the Gospel does not describe his future with Jesus, but his present. In chapter 12 of John’s gospel, the anointing of Jesus takes place at the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany. We are told that Martha served, Mary anoints Jesus, and Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead "was one of those at the table with him." The raising of Lazarus gives him new life not only in Jesus, but with Jesus in his present context. And it is life in abundance.

In chapter 10 of John’s gospel, the chapter that precedes today’s account, Jesus proclaims, “I came that they may have life and have it more abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). Jesus, and God the Father, with whom he is one, is the source of abundant life here and now. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. He is that nourishing, sustaining, lasting something that the human heart yearns for, because in him, all our hopes are realized. He ushers in abundant life for all people, in our present and immediate circumstances, whatever they may be, wherever we may be. In Christ, God is at work liberating humans from all forces of imprisonment and oppression, not the least of which is death itself. Whatever binds us - disease, distress, even death – Jesus calls us, like Lazarus, to “come out,” to be unbound, and to live.

Next Sunday is Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. As we begin the journey of Holy Week, we are invited to witness the turmoil of Jesus’ last week on earth – the tenderness, the love, the pain, the need for something more, the emotion, and the rawness. We will witness the depth of human dejection and the gruesome power of death. But we will also witness Jesus’ own personal call to “come out,” be unbounded and live.

It's not easy to enter into an unbounded life - a life of restoration and redemption. There's no prescribed method, neither for the people of Israel, Lazarus, nor even Jesus himself. The only constant in each of these stories was and is God. And in God all things are possible. God made new life possible, for those who came before us, and God makes it possible for us. May this God, the God of redemption, restoration, and resurrection breathe new life in us and in all who are looking and striving for something more out of life. Amen.