



Keystone Species

Homily for St. John's Episcopal Church by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given March 26, 2023

The Fifth Sunday in Lent: Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11

At first blush, today's readings might make you think that we had skipped through lent and just went straight to Easter. Resurrection is everywhere. The reading from Ezekiel is this strange almost shamanic-like journey where the prophet sees what is utterly beyond hope, a valley full of bones, a mass grave, coming to life. Then we see the very intimate story of Jesus' raising his dear friend Lazarus from the dead. Doesn't that sound more like Easter to you than lent?

But actually, if you look at these stories closely, you will see that the majority of the time in both stories is spent before the resurrection happens. In both stories, we come to terms with the full extent of death and hopelessness. The last card has been played, the last treatment has been tried, the last effort has been made, and then the end has come. And it is precisely into that moment of hopelessness that God asks Ezekiel, Son of Man, can these bones live? In that moment, Jesus asks if Martha believes there can be a resurrection of her brother. In both cases, in the deep despair and loss that is present, a word of hope is spoken. It is that moment that I want to focus on, since we are in lent.

All of us, at one point or another in life, have those moments of despair or loss. Some are you have spoken with me about facing the diminishment of aging. Others have loved ones who are very sick. And some of us feel hopeless in other ways. Last week a friend of mine told me that she used to be optimistic; she used to feel that in general, things were going to work out in the end. She said she doesn't feel that way anymore. Watching what has happened and is happening in this world has made hope harder to come by for her.

All the great religious traditions have their particular genius, and for me, part of the genius of Christian faith is that it does not sugarcoat things. It faces life without denial. It asks us to face honestly the places where we are out of ideas and resources and hope. And God meets us there.

So what is this hope that God offers us, in this place where we truly have none? I suspect that for most of us, we just want things to go back to the way they were. We want our loved ones back. We want our health back. We want Russia to hit reverse and back out of Ukraine. But it doesn't seem that is how hope works in scripture. Jesus says to Martha, *I am the resurrection and the life*. Clearly Jesus is saying that resurrection, whatever else it is in the future, it also involves here and now. What kind of hope that is not just a fantasy could take dry bones from a mass grave and make a living community of people? What kind of power defeats even death?

In the end, hope is about change. Hope is having some tiny spark in you believing that things can be different. Resurrection may seem like a strange miracle limited to the Bible. But all you have to do is look out the

window and see the snow receding to know that spring is coming. No matter how hard the winter has been, every year, life is born anew. To begin with, hope comes from observing the natural order and seeing what happens every spring, every dawn. Out of the deep cold and sleeping death of winter, warmth and light and green life sprouts. Out of the dark night, the beauty of sunrise shows up every single day, no matter what we do. Our Creator has made it so. And these patterns exist in all reality through God's active, Spirit-filled love, and with our cooperation.

Perhaps many of you know the story about wolves in Yellowstone. By the 1920s, wolves had been eradicated in Yellowstone, having been deemed a threat to livestock. This had an increasingly negative impact on the park. The lack of wolves meant an increase in elk and deer, who began to overgraze, which decreased the number of trees and bushes. This decreased the population of birds and led to soil erosion particularly around the river, which threatened the beaver habitat. Coyotes flourished, on the other hand, which decreased the small rodent population which dramatically reduced the number of foxes, eagles, badgers, and other birds of prey. Yellowstone began to look like a poster child for ecological collapse.

But in the 1990s, wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone. And all of the harm I just described to you began to heal. The elk declined, which led to more trees and bushes, which led to more birds, and the soil around the river began to stabilize. Yellowstone regenerated in a way that utterly surprised even the ecologists who had been hoping just that this terrible decline would slow down. Instead, Yellowstone began to flourish again. It

turns out that wolves are something ecologists call “keystone species.” A keystone is found in an arch, which is made by placing stones in such a way that they all lean on and support one another. A single stone called a keystone occupies a unique place in the structure and holds the whole thing together. The keystone isn’t any better or bigger than any other stone, but it holds a unique place. Wolves are like that.

Where things seemed hopeless, new life and regeneration occurred. Where it all begins is with God asking us, *Can these bones live?* We are faced with asking, can we have hope? God tells the prophet Ezekiel to prophesy to the wind, tell the wind to bring breath and spirit to these bones. In strange metaphoric language, God is asking the prophet to speak a word of hope to people who had no hope. There are times when we become agents of hope and regeneration for one another. When we cannot see hope, another can hold it for us until we can recognize it again. It turns out that resurrection is the beautiful power of God’s love and healing that brings life again where there had been only death and loss and despair.

Lent is the time of the year that is the most introspective for followers of Jesus’ Way of Love. It is a time we are invited to face honestly what we would rather avoid. Let me ask you: what do you feel the most angst or hopelessness about? If God were to say to you, *Mortal, Can these bones live?* What would you say?

In John’s gospel, Jesus says that he has come that we might have life, and have it abundantly. Jesus’ first miracle in John’s gospel was to turn water into wine so that people could celebrate. Something so seemingly

frivolous shows the extent to which God wishes us joy. God is seeking the joy and flourishing of all life, not just human life. And God has given humans the incredible gift of being co-creators with a unique role in the world's ecosystems. We have amazing minds that can see things and make choices that are not available in the same way to other species. So let us imagine that God's will for us is resurrection and life in this world, here and now, even where we see only loss, and ask this: How can we live our lives in a way that is regenerative for ourselves and others? How can we be like wolves in Yellowstone, living out of our unique giftedness in ways that benefit the diversity and flourishing of the whole? How can we be part of God's endless resurrection, God's Spirit endlessly blowing life and breath into one another?

There are three kinds of keystone species. One is the apex predator, like the wolf. Another is the ecosystem engineer keystone species which change the physical environment, like the beaver. And the third kind of keystone species are the mutualists, those who work closely with other species, giving and receiving help, in a way that goes far beyond the benefit of the two species—like bees and flowers and pollination.

I believe God has given human beings a particular vocation, that of caring for this sacred earth. We could seek to become a mutualist keystone species, promoting a wild regeneration, a resurrection, of all life. When there is so much death and despair—facing the full extent of trauma in our history, the extent of an economy based on extraction and not on regeneration that is causing the climate crisis, the reality of war and migration and on and on—what if God is asking the people of St. John's, *can these bones live?*

I believe that St. John's can be a small but mighty demonstration plot of a regenerative way of being. A people who respond to the Creator's call to prophesy to the bones and to the wind, to believe that things can be different, and to act accordingly. We can see ourselves as primarily a spiritual incubator for this radically regenerative way of living, following Jesus' Way of Love. We can be a community whose central question is: *what promotes life and regeneration for all?* And then have the courage to devote our choices, attention and resources there. We can organize ourselves into small groups who creatively find the hope and wisdom in our sacred stories, who encourage each other when we are in despair, who deeply come to know the human and more-than-human life all around us, and who learn together how to live in this radically regenerative way. With God's help, we can seek to become a keystone species in the different ecosystems of which we are a part.

If you feel hopeless, I encourage you not to isolate, but to risk being vulnerable with people you trust in this community, and allow them to hold hope for you until you can feel it again. For all of us, as we move through this time of change in the life of St. John's, let's not get bogged down with tiny things that don't really matter. Let's recognize that we exist for the world outside our doors, and seek and serve Christ, the highest good, of all life. Amen.