

People take up or give up many different things in the season of Lent. Chocolate, alcohol, and Diet Coke seem to be vices many leave behind for 40 days. For others, they pick up something, a service project, a prayer practice. I once knew a colleague who tried to memorize a piece of scripture word for word, every Lent. And at Easter, he could recite by memory a beautiful piece of the gospel. By Easter, he would say he memorized John's beautiful introduction in the gospel "In the beginning was the word". In another year, he tackled the Magnificat. It was a practice that I hoped to do one year myself.

And I might start with a line from the gospel this morning, the famous story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the tomb. And I might start with John 11:35, "Jesus wept." That's the whole verse. I think we all got it. It's the shortest verse in the New Testament. Mark always tells me this, and it is true. Brevity is a virtue. Two tiny words, just barely a sentence. And yet they say so much about the Christian faith and about Jesus who was undoubtedly both fully divine and fully human in this powerful moment. The scene is raw, full of pure emotion, desperation, blame, sorrow. Anyone who has ever lost someone they love like Mary and Martha and Jesus loved Lazarus knows what that scene is like. When all one can see is the ending that didn't go like they thought it would.

Those two tiny words tell us a great deal about the Christian life, which I think is all too commonly now falsely associated with a life of ease, a life without a struggle, a life without any valleys. But Jesus weeping proves that none of us get out of here without at least one skinned knee, without at least a little bit of scar tissue on our hearts.

And also in these moments of grief, of loss, we often tend to take down our mask and say something, a comment that maybe we wouldn't under normal circumstances, but the truth becomes a little less filtered, which Martha takes the lead on here when she asks Jesus to open the tomb. The gospel we read describes it like this. Martha said, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." But the

author of the King James version writes it like this. Martha said, "Lord, he stinketh." Perhaps another great verse you might want to put on your memorization list.

Mary and Martha had already performed the burial rituals for their beloved brother Lazarus, as it was custom to do this as soon as possible by covering the body in oil and then wrapping strips of linen tightly around the body, placing fragrant herbs between the cloths. They have done what loved ones do when there is nothing left to do. They have dressed their dead. And these strips of linen, these small strips would be his burial clothes.

And I was thinking about that image of Mary and Martha weeping and wrapping these pieces of fabric tightly around his body. And I wondered how often do we do that to ourselves? Wrap ourselves in burial clothes. Maybe it's a story that we tell ourselves silently in our heads over and over again about someone who wronged us, reciting to ourselves yet again, the injustice of it all, clenching on to that one story. How often do we tell ourselves a story about who we are or about what we're capable of or about what we deserve that's not rooted in life, but in death? How often do we refuse to give up the sins that literally bind us? Or to borrow from the language of Ezekiel this morning, how often do we take a trip down to the valley of the dry bones and park ourselves there for a little while or years?

Lent is a time of honesty. It's a time when we look at ourselves and we tell it like it is, and when we tell God things like they are. There's no need to sugarcoat things with God, he already knows, so you might as well just get it out there. If you're crushed, tell him. If you're lost, say it. If the ache in your heart won't go away, a great place to take that is to the Lord. Where is your valley of the dry bones? We all have them.

For a long time, I have followed an organization called Thistle Farms, which was started by an Episcopal priest named Reverend Becca Stevens. And the slogan of Thistle Farms is Love Heals. It's a residential program in Tennessee, and they take in women who have seen some pretty dark days and

some pretty dark spaces. Often, they come to Thistle Farms having never known a safe environment. But there, they are given housing, job training, healthcare, food, and therapy for two years with the belief that these women can heal from the worst of it if they experience a loving environment.

In most days, the community starts off with a group session, and they tell this story about this woman who came and stayed with them for a while. And every time they would open a meeting, they'd introduce themselves with their names. And when it got to be her turn, she would say her name, and then she would always introduce something demeaning about herself. "Well, I'm really messed up. I've done some really awful things." Something or the other that always let everyone know what she really thought about herself. And you can see the burial clothes wrapped around her piece by piece, thread by thread, bound her up tightly into the story that she could not escape.

And one day, one of the women in the circle said to her, "You know that's not your name, right? Around here, we call each other by our names." And slowly, over time, in a community that refused to let her stay bound, she began to just say her name, nothing more, nothing less, because that's what love does. It unbinds, it frees, and that's where the gospel is headed. Because when Lazarus comes out of the tomb, the miracle has already happened, but the story's not over. He is alive, but Lazarus is still wrapped in his burial clothes. And that's when Jesus turns [to] the community and says, "Unbind him. Let him go." Because Lazarus cannot live dressed for death and neither can we.

We're not made to live our life in burial clothes. We were made to live it in our baptism clothes. Clothes that name you. Clothes that claim you. Clothes that say that your life is not over. In the early church, those who were being baptized would be clothed in these beautiful white garments. It was a beautiful ceremony. A sign of new life, new identity. Not because everything in their life had been fixed because they were baptized, not

because their past had totally disappeared, but because they were given a new life. And sometimes we can't take off those burial clothes by ourselves. We need a community. We need people who look at us and say, "That's not your name." People who will help unbind us.

In the Book of Common Prayer, there's a line that I return to again and again in the service for Morning Prayer. It says, "To love you is perfect freedom." Perfect freedom. What is that? It's certainly not the freedom to do whatever we want. It's not the freedom of having to follow a set of rules that we have to get right, but it's the freedom of living in our baptism clothes. The freedom of being named, loved, forgiven, freed. The freedom of stepping out of the grave, even while the wrapping's still clean, trusting that God and God's people are not finished unbinding us.

So, as we round the corner of Lent and we set our hearts towards Holy Week, hold on to this. You are not what has bound you. You are not the worst thing that you have carried. You are dressed for life. So come out, step into the light and let yourself be unbound. Amen.