

James Kenneth Echols Prize for Excellence in Preaching Sermons

Editorial note: *In this issue we are including two sermons for the season of Lent preached by seminarians at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) in the spring of 2023. Annually LSTC students are offered the opportunity to compete for the James Kenneth Echols Prize for Excellence in Preaching. This annual preaching event began in 2008 through a gift from Mr. LeRoy T. Carlson, who donated funds for this annual event. His aims were to promote the quality and excellence of preaching, inspire students to fully use their varied gifts to improve their preaching skill, increase the visibility and importance of preaching the gospel on the seminary campus and the world beyond, and recognize the Rev. Dr. James Kenneth Echols, the first person of African Descent to serve as president of a North American seminary and fifth president of LSTC from 1997–2011, and his many contributions to this school and the world of theological education.*

On the day of the public competition, homiletics teacher, the Rev. Dr. Kim Beckmann, introduced the event with these words: “Into a time of local and global upheaval that may make us wonder if all change is failure, if all disruption is conflict, Gail and Kathrine bring us sermons on the raising of Lazarus. In the Fifth Sunday of Lent, we receive these eschatological promises of Easter’s liberation, reconciliation, and renewal in the echoes of Psalm 130’s waiting in hope out of the depths and the life breathed into our dry bones in the theme ‘Rise Up!’”

Alive, but Not Unbound

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Did a scripture passage ever make you wonder, “What happened next?” The Bible is not a novel, in which all the loose ends of characters’ lives are tied up at the end. We’re not sure what happens to Jesus’ good friend Lazarus after Jesus restores his life. And we know all too well what happens to Jesus.

This story is the tipping point in the Gospel of John. Already in Chapter 7, we learn some Pharisees want to imprison this itinerant teacher who has performed six miraculous signs and stirred up Judea. Just before this passage, Jesus barely escaped Jerusalem during the feast of the Dedication, when a mob heard him teaching that he is one with God, and they nearly stoned him to death for blasphemy. Jesus and his followers had to regroup across the Jordan, away from Judea. Now, three years later, Jesus is back where it all began, at the Jordan. Jesus is teaching when he receives the word: “Come at once: your friend Lazarus is dying.”

The siblings Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are Jesus’ chosen family. Their home in Bethany has been his place of refuge. One would expect Jesus to leave immediately to get there, to have a chance to make a difference. However, the home is located in Judea, just two miles outside Jerusalem, a dangerous place for Jesus to be. Probably with his disciples’ encouragement, Jesus stays and teaches for two more days. Only then does he say, “Let us go to Judea again.” The disciples know that nothing they say can stop Jesus from this journey and what is to come. Bluntly honest, Thomas speaks what they all are thinking: “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Two days later, Jesus and his disciples arrive in Bethany. Lazarus had died the day Jesus received the sisters’ message. So, in their pain, both sisters speak harsh words, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

To translate Mary and Martha’s grief-filled words: they had given in to hopelessness. In the Jewish faith, people typically are buried on the day they die. The soul, it was believed, leaves the body after three days. It was now Day Four—past the point of no return. Jesus was met, first by Martha, who professes her faith in the resurrection to come. Jesus readjusts the timeframe: “Not someday, Martha, today. Not somewhere, Martha, here. Right here, right now. Do you believe?”

“Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the One coming into the world.” Despite her grief, Martha declares the most profound faith statement found anywhere in the Gospels.

Martha and Jesus then join up with Mary. Jesus accompanies them to the tomb, ostensibly to grieve with them. Deeply moved, Jesus weeps. Then in a foreshadowing of Jesus’ own resurrection, Jesus commands the stone to be rolled away. He performs his seventh and final sign: “Lazarus, come out!” This is followed by, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

What happened to Lazarus next? The story doesn’t tell what happens to Lazarus after Jesus brought him back to life. We learn that some tried to kill him. If he wasn’t killed, did Lazarus forever have to live with the whispers and finger-pointing ... “There, he’s the one who was dead.” Perhaps after a while, when the novelty wore off, Lazarus may have wished he had never been brought

back to life. Perhaps there was some survivor's guilt that his own resurrection, this final sign, led to Jesus' crucifixion.

Throughout my previous work in human services, I have met a lot of Lazaruses, but one sticks with me. This man had experienced one tragedy after another. A severely abusive father beat him and his brother. A serious car wreck from which he barely survived. An industrial accident that messed up his ankle. Then, a cancer diagnosis.

He wanted to provide for his wife financially, but one thing or another stopped him. His injuries prevented him from doing physical labor; his PTSD was a barrier to doing anything stressful. One employer after another rejected him. Finally, his wife left him.

I heard the echoes of Lazarus in his frustration: "I'm alive, but I can't really live. I'm still bound, and no one will set me free." He's not the only one—the cries of Lazarus are everywhere in our world. Tell me if you have heard them too:

- Freed from a tomb at the Department of Corrections but bound by a felony record.
- Freed from the tomb of society's mis-gendering and misunderstanding but bound by discrimination and the costs of medical and legal processes.
- Freed from the tomb of addictions but bound by a track record of job losses.
- Freed from the tomb of an abusive marriage but bound by a lack of work history and the high cost of childcare.
- Freed from the tomb of a life-threatening illness but bound by income limitations to keep Medicare and Medicaid.
- Freed from the tomb of an unsafe country but bound by the rules of asylum petitions in our country.

Every one of these examples involves a Lazarus brought to life, but still bound. One remains trapped between what is and what could be. Certainly, this is not living the abundant life that God meant for all people.

It's necessary and a privilege to feed the hungry, provide shelter to the unhoused, visit the prisoner, and wholeheartedly to support Pride, Reproductive Rights, and Black Lives Matter events. But these don't remove the binding of systemic injustice. It doesn't restore equity to all people. It doesn't set them free.

What if we went all out, and followed Jesus' instructions to unbind the Lazaruses of our world and set them free? What would God's liberating freedom look like? I'm not certain—but I once caught a glimpse of it.

On "God's Work. Our Hands." Sunday in 2016, a young man and his mother sat in our congregation. This was a kind of a surprise, because it was a short service of sending, to bless us to do God's work in our communities. In his homily, my pastor revealed he had come to know this young man through a request to perform some community service hours. He had every intention of completing the hours, but between his work and a

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health condition, the burden had become great. An "unbinding" had become necessary.

On that day, with the council's blessing, this young man—no longer a stranger, but our neighbor—was released from his burden by the combined hours of eighteen service projects, hundreds of volunteer hours. Words from that ritual in the worship service echo even now: "That he be set free. That he stand tall in Christ." And as he rose in that moment, he did stand tall among us. He was unbound—set free for a different future.

It takes both emergency relief and advocacy to break down the barriers that prevent people from living lives of joy and freedom. None of us can do it all. But I believe all of us were given a spirit of justice and a vision of the kin-dom set right, as it should be. It's part of your vocation, not in some future call, but now, right here at seminary.

You may be the person volunteering at the food bank, while I write letters to legislators, asking them to continue support for SNAP, meals for seniors and school children, and immigration reform. You may take the Gospel and the Eucharist to those behind bars, while another mentors youth with the goal of ending the school-to-prison pipeline. While volunteers with The Night Ministry are bringing food and supplies to unhoused individuals, a busload of people from an interfaith coalition is rallying at the capital for more affordable housing. As our grateful response for God's grace setting us free, we have more than enough to do in this world!

In our gospel today, I wonder, what happens next for Lazarus? John never gives us the answer—only that Jesus not only resurrected him but unbound him and set him free.

What we will do with this message in the coming months and beyond remains to be seen. We are still living the question, searching for answers. What I do know is this: We do the work of Christ when we see and hear our neighbors and accompany them in removing the structural barriers that hold them back. We cannot do it alone. But I am convinced, we are here, answering this call, to ignite the fires of justice in our congregations and communities. We are the peace-bringers and the way-makers. We are the inspired and the inspiration. We are the visionaries and the hands and feet. We are the Church—the Public Church—the now and not yet. We are called not only to share pastoral and prophetic words but to unbind Lazarus wherever we find him.

Resurrection Change: Finding New Life in Grief

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Change, Change, Change, Change.

As much as people have written about, thought about, dreamt about, sung about change -- when the time comes to doing it, we often don't want to. And yet, we have so much to say about change. I can think of many great songs written about change. Some of my favorites that come to mind include "Landslide" by Fleetwood Mac, "A Change's Gonna Come" by Sam Cooke, or "Changes" by David Bowie. One of my very favorites about change, and quite possibly one of my favorite songs ever, "I Wish I Knew How it Would Feel to be Free," by Nina Simone. In this song Simone sings of a world that has changed toward freedom, freedom from white supremacy into liberation. In such a world Ms. Simone says she thinks she would be so free that she could fly. This freedom is defined by her as, "Freedom as in No Fear!" A world changed to be without fear, a world transformed toward something new.

I wish I could be like a
bird in the sky.
How sweet it would be if
I found I could fly.
Oh, I'd soar to the sun and
look down at the sea.
Then I'd sing 'cause I'd know
how it feels to be free.

Don't we want this world Ms. Simone sings of? This world built around change?

The life and ministry of Jesus, too, was colored by change. Change in empire, change in institutions, change in norms, and changes in community. In this Gospel reading, we see Jesus come face to face with some of the greatest change we face in this life, the change we call death. When Jesus hears the news of Lazarus and his illness, Jesus stays back for two nights before going to see his dying friend, the grief ringing in his ears. Jesus waits, and Lazarus passes on. Jesus makes his way back to Bethany with his disciples, knowing what he is going to do. Grief from change permeates every sentence of this Gospel text. Coming upon the tomb of Lazarus, the crowd all witnesses how much Jesus loved this man. He weeps. And then he calls forth his friends, Mary and Martha, to roll away the tombstone. Despite the smell. Despite the discomfort, despite the ongoing endless grief.

The rock rolls away, the dust billows softly next to the green things growing and the bugs and the dry air, like dry bones. And

Jesus says, "Lazarus come out!" At that moment Lazarus changes and he emerges. Alive once more. Jesus calls on the community to unbind him, to care for him in this new change. And they all witness how it is to be set free. "And I'd sing 'cause I know how it feels to be free." Through the actions of Jesus in this story we witness his deep divinity as the Son of God, his ability to raise Lazarus from the dead. We also witness his humanity, mourning, tears, weeping, and his deep, deep grief.

This story of Lazarus being raised, in which Jesus reveals both his power and his grief, reminds me of a favorite image of mine that I brought with me into seminary, blazing with passion. Mushrooms! If you never met me back when I arrived at LSTC just know that this girl was talking about mushrooms. I came in fascinated with the theology of mushrooms. Because mushrooms don't grow on new things or fresh things or pretty things that catch the eye. Mushrooms grow on things we have been taught to look away from. Things that are decaying, stinking, soiled, worthless. Things worth ignoring and even, sometimes, mushrooms grow on things we revile. Things that are rotting.

Mushrooms grow on those stinking things and return them back into the soil, so that they can grow back into new life. More than that, mushrooms don't just work on their own as little boot-strapping individualistic shrooms. Mushrooms work in intense, mutual, reciprocal community with one another. In fact, underneath the soil miles and miles of mushrooms, or mycelium, grow connected to one another. Sending messages throughout networks of soil, channeling nutrients across different forests. All so that they can take back what has gone away, so that new things can grow.

So, like I said about this gospel text, Jesus reminds me of a mushroom. Let me explain. Jesus doesn't go where things are safe and pretty. In this text, he goes straight back to Judea, where he's already been threatened. The disciples urge him, "shouldn't you avoid it?" But no, like a mushroom who doesn't grow on the prettiest, safest flower, Jesus goes back to a place he's been encouraged to avoid. Like a mushroom that doesn't grow on the prettiest flower, Jesus goes where there has been a death, where there is lament and mourning. He doesn't go to the biggest building, the highest place of power or principality. Instead, he goes to his two friends, Mary and Martha, who own a bit of property out a ways from Bethany. Jesus knocks on their door instead of some ruler's. He goes there to grieve with his friends.

In this grief, Jesus shows that through his divine power he has the ability to raise up change out of what has gone away. To raise

up Lazarus into a new man, unbound and free. Like a mushroom that doesn't work alone but stretches into a community of mycelium, Jesus works signs embedded deeply within the network of his community. Like a mushroom, vibrantly rejuvenating its ecosystem with new nutrients growing new life and change out of what has been cast aside, Jesus in divine wonder transforms the immense grief and mourning of his friends into celebration and freedom. You see, I like to imagine that mushrooms learned a thing or two from this awesome resurrecting Christ. Do you get it now?

And so, we thank God for this, thank God, because we know that it can feel as though our grief, our mourning, our isolation in a world that seeks to tire us out is the end of it all. This grief we feel can be so isolating. So isolating and sticky. Sticky like molasses. It sticks to our bones and our muscles, to our laughter and to our tears. Many of us—I myself included--struggle time and again, struggle with the desire to look back at a memory gone lost, gone buried in the ground. It's all so painful to look at this grief, to feel this decay. It can be so tiring to witness and experience, oh, so much suffering. But this Gospel text reminds me that Jesus is pointing us toward the divine power in witnessing our grief. Jesus guides us toward looking at our own grief, that stinking loss, that hurting pain. Jesus calls us to witness and be present with this grief. He sits by our side as we trace our fingertips in the soils of our grief, upturning stories and memories buried in the dirt, bringing them up toward the surface.

This Gospel text reminds us that when we sit with the stickiness of our grief, Jesus is by our side, whispering, "Come out! Come out!" so that new life might shoot up from the soils of our grief, that we might unbind one another and be set free. These things that we've been taught to look away from are exactly where Christ is calling us to look at something new transforming, something changing, something bringing us into a deeper sense of peace.

Jesus is the freedom that Ms. Simone sings of. Freedom over the sea and stars and sky. Setting Lazarus to walk again with just a word. Setting him free. Jesus is that thing that meets us in our mourning and grief and says, "Look, there is new life growing!" Jesus seeps his hands into the soil latent with mycelial connection and community. We dig back the soil of our communities that hold us in our grief, and look toward something new, something free.

Blessed people I pray in joy and praise today that Jesus brings us into liberation. Liberation from fear. Fear of what was, and what should have been done, and what will be. We are free! Free from

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supremacy and status. Free from brutality and violence. This isn't a freedom that will just one day be, if we wait real long and real quiet and don't cause a scene. This freedom is emerging, changing, and becoming--now. I see it in the cracks around us and in all of you in these last few uncertain years. As we wonder and worry what is coming our way next, as we grieve. Christ has been here among us, growing new things out of our garden beds, out of our honest, sometimes painful, conversations, as we call out injustice,

Christ is here in this community breaking us open toward change. We are called into the Spirit to watch that new life grow. To watch as it tears down the walls of wire that divide boundaries between nations. We are called to watch the Spirit soften hardened hearts and do the unthinkable. Doing so in the bodies, voices, and communities of trans divine people, Black children, disabled people. New life like Lazarus is coming up out of our tears, up from our grief, our vulnerability, our wholeness. The Spirit we've seen works and moves changing these things into freedom out from the margins where we've been taught to look away.

Thank you, God, for being a God of resurrection, a God of new life. God takes our deepest grievances, our deepest violence, and our pain, and without any work on our part, God rewilds these back into the soil, transforming them into something else. Thank you, Lord! We praise you, Lord, thank you! We witness this work in every corner we have been taught to ignore, every sealed tomb made dry and alone. Christ is there in the undoing of things, making something new. We witness countless transformations as Christ calls us to come out, come out! Bring us out into community, into liberation, into freedom without fear. Raise us up, so that we might honor the deep love of Christ in our lives each and every day. Amen.