***“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”***

Many of us have heard of this proclamation from Jesus before, especially at a funeral or memorial service. Throughout the Gospel John, there are 6 other of these “I am” statements that Jesus identified himself. The others were I am the **Bread of Life,** the **Light of the World,** the **Door,** the **Good Shepherd,** the **Way,** the **Truth,** the **Life,** and the **True Vine.**

In the passage that we just read, the Gospel writer John invited us to the funeral of one of Jesus’s closest friends – Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. Now, we’re not quite sure of the cause of Lazarus’ death, all we know is that he had been very gravely ill for a while. Mary was hoping that perhaps Jesus would be able to save her brother, if he had come earlier to visit them. After all, he and his disciples were just the next town over. When Jesus received word that Lazarus was on the verge of death, Jesus didn’t seem to take it in stride to drop everything and rush off to see Lazarus one final time. In fact, Jesus even waited 2 more days before he responded to his disciples *“this illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it. Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him."[[1]](#footnote-1)* Wake him up? What was Jesus thinking? How could he say such a thing?

Many of his disciples were astonished of Jesus’ response especially considering how close Jesus was to Mary, Marth, and Lazarus. Did he even care? Perhaps deep in their minds, Mary and Martha thought that their little brother would not have died if Jesus had hurried off to see Lazarus before his death.

Nevertheless, Jesus did not panic and knew exactly what was going on. He wanted to send a precise message that **this moment wasn’t about Lazarus or his earthly death**, **but instead it was** **about the transformation of one’s faith from disbelief to belief, while embracing the life eternal through Christ –** similar to what weread about last week concerning the blind man who could see for the very first time. It was all about what God is doing and never about us.

Undoubtedly, Jesus felt the human loss just like anyone else would, including you and me. He would grieve over the human pains and sufferings. He shed his emotional tears and wept[[2]](#footnote-2) alongside Mary and Martha. But then he turned to Martha and asked if she believes in the greater miracle of God? And Martha said, ***“Yes, LORD,******I believe that you ARE the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”***

Once again, like the woman-at-the-well, we notice that God used the voice of another woman in order to proclaim the identity of the true Messiah. Unfortunately, many people including Jesus’ disciples were still unsure about who Jesus was and what His earthly mission was. Many still didn’t get it or at least had doubt! Like the blind man whom we read about last week, the disciples were blinded not only in their eyes but in their heart with their disbelief and their lack of faith.

While many only focused their attention upon the physical and earthly lives, Jesus was more concerned about one’s spiritual and eternal life. The disciples feared of their own welfare and survival while failing to see the Spirit at work in their lives. It was Thomas, who would express doubts and disbelief in Jesus’s resurrection, sarcastically claimed that they would go and die alongside with Lazarus.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Like many others, Thomas was so emotionally caught up with the present life and the fear of losing it all, that he had failed to see the greater promise of new life as offered through Christ. **Thomas had his eyes fixed on things of the past and the present, instead of what is possible and what is to come.**

Remember last week, we talked about how we human look upon our outward appearance but God looks into our hearts and upon our faith. In our story today, Jesus capitalized on the death of Lazarus and turned it into yet another teaching moment for his disciples. It’s not so much of the body or the physical condition that we are entrapped with today, but instead of what God can and promises to do in liberating us and granting us that freedom. THAT is what we should focus our faith on each day.

It had already been four days since Lazarus had died by the time Jesus and his disciples finally arrived. As you would imagine, the body had begun to stench, even with proper treatment with perfume and anointment. People were anxious about what Jesus would do next? Would he perform another miracle? Well he did, a miracle that foretold his own miracle of resurrection and rebirth. Instead of focusing on what’s inside the tomb, which represented death and perpetuity, Jesus wanted his disciples to focus on what is good coming out of all of this – focus on the life and promises of God.

Jesus commanded the dead man Lazarus to come out, with his hands and feet still bound and his face wrapped in a linen cloth. Jesus spoke into the spirit of this dead man. ***“Unbind him”*** Jesus said, **“*and let him go!”[[4]](#footnote-4)*** Those are powerful commands of casting out the spirit of death and ordering the spirit of life into this body full of abundance and hope.

Just as Joseph read for us earlier in our Old Testament passage from Ezekiel, the Spirit breathed life to our seemingly lifeless bodies and a pile of dry bones. God performed the CPR and breathed the Spirit of life into us and we become vital once again with our spiritual and physical bodies, giving all of our honor and glory to God.

Come to think of it, the raising of Lazarus not only symbolized Jesus’s own death and resurrection to come, but also our own as we placed our faith and trust into Christ. How many layers of shrouds are we being bound like Lazarus that has kept us in the grave for much too long? How often have we found ourselves clinging on to the memory of our past while God is challenging us “to move on and to sing a new song!” We keep looking into the grave representing death, whereas our main focus should be out and about into the lives of the people, full of life and hope.

As the Psalmist challenged us to declare God’s majesty*, “O sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. 2 Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. 3 Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples. 4 For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods.[[5]](#footnote-5)*

What must we unbind and let go of in order for God to sing a new song in our lives?

A couple of years ago, I was nominated to serve as a member of the Administrative Commission of the Presbytery of NYC. This Commission’s charge was to dissolve a congregation in Bay Ridge and to integrate them into another congregation who are within close proximity of each other. After months (if not years) of prayerful discernment, both congregations felt that the Holy Spirit was prompting their hearts to partner in mission with one another. One door closes, as another opens. God’s ministry and mission live on.

Both the *Bay Ridge United Church* and the *4th Avenue Presbyterian Church* sought this win-win opportunity for joint mission, to consolidate and to strengthen God’s gifts and resources for the glory of God’s church. They have found peace in laying aside the “survival to the end” mentality and decided to move along towards the greater sense of mission and purpose for God’s Kingdom. Both congregations saw this as an opportunity of growth for the future rather than a loss of the past, as God begins this new chapter of their faith journey.

Our committee met with members of both congregations. We listened to many of their joys and celebrations, as well as their own pains, concerns, fears, and uncertainties. At the end, they saw themselves as faithful life seeking body rather than a pile of dry bones. Overall, the congregation welcomed this liberating and faith transforming process as it sprung new life, a new beginning of what is to come.

As the LORD spoken to the people through the prophet Isaiah, “*You are my witnesses and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.”[[6]](#footnote-6) 18 Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.” “For I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”[[7]](#footnote-7)* Our God is a faithful God.

The Spirit that was spoken into our heart today is an unbinding spirit that liberates us and grants us freedom to re-imagine what is possible. **Out of the desolate wilderness, comes the water through the rock and the promise of the land of milk and honey.** The Spirit of God breathes new life into us through the pulses of our discernment. As the Apostle Paul shared with the early church in Corinth that “*we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”[[8]](#footnote-8)*

Jesus invoked the Holy Spirit to unbind the shrouds of the dead man Lazarus, one layer at a time. In the same way, the Spirit also challenges us that we must let go of our personal fears and hurdles, that often bind us and constrict us of our freedom. The Spirit serves as the ligament that re-connects the various members of the body and re-kindles the vibrancy and life into those dry bones and lifeless bodies.

As we are about to enter the holiest week of our Christian calendar, let us never forget our own journey of faith – How did we get here? What journey have we trod? What valleys of dry bones have we pass through? In order to receive this new life in Christ, we must lay to death of our bodies, our personal desires and ambitions. We must “unbind” the shrouds and “let go” of our burdens that weight us down.

May the Spirit unbind us and set us free, as we fervently listen to what the Spirit have to say to us through prayers and discernment of God’s calling among us.

Out of God’s eternal mercy and providence, **God will breathe new life into God’s people here on earth.** God will bind us with His sinews and ligaments that unite us as one body, one faith, one Lord, and one baptism. In a moment, we will be coming before this table of grace and to proclaim this taste of freedom as the Spirit provides. Whenever we respond to the Spirit’s calling as we gather before the Lord’s Table, we remember not only what Christ has commanded us – to love one another, as He washed our feet and shared the last meal with us, we also remember what Christ has done for us, by the surrendering of His own body in order that we may live and have life in full abundance. Whenever 2 or 3 are gathered as in Christ’s name, Christ is here among us. The Spirit is living among us right now. Come, Holy Spirit, Come!

Sisters and brothers, let us come before this table with confidence, humility and grace, as we celebrate who we are as Christ’s body bound together **by the Spirit** and **of the Spirit**. ***“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”[[9]](#footnote-9)***

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *John 11:4 and 11* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *John 11:35* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *John 11:16* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *John 11:44* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Psalm 96:1-4* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Isaiah 43:10* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Isaiah 43:18-19* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *II Corinthians 4:18* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *John 20:29* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)