
“Seeking: Can these bones live?”

A SERMON on John 11:1-45 (with Ezekiel 37:1-14) for the 5th Sunday in Lent, Year A
Preached 26 March 2023 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister¹
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It starts with a simple piano riff. Just two notes: a B and an F sharp.
(*not in rhythm:*) Doo (B) – Doo (F#) – Doo (B).

That’s an open 5th in music theory terms, a common and basic building block in music of all sorts, something you hear all the time.

But the open 5th, this one or *any* one, is perhaps more remarkable for what it does *not* express than for what it does. It is, as the name implies, *open*. Neither major or minor, happy or sad, it is naked, bare, unencumbered by any other notes that would give an interpretation, a colour, a direction. Clean and unadorned, and yet also a bit haunting, it is like an empty picture frame—free and open to any and all possibility, and nevertheless seeming vacant and wanting.

(*not in rhythm:*) Doo (B) – Doo (F#) – Doo (B).

(*in rhythm:*) Doo-Doo-Do000. Doo-Doo-Do000. Doo-Doo-Do000. Doo-Doo-Do000.

Doo-Doo-Do000.

With this simple, two-note piano riff, the Denver-based band The Fray opened the first single on their 2009 self-titled album, a track called “You Found Me”. In this song that is both profound and rather ambiguous, the singer answers this simple and sparse piano opening first by setting a rather curious scene:

*I found God on the corner of 1st and Amistad, where the West was all but won,
All alone, smoking his last cigarette,
I said, “Where have you been?” He said, “Ask anything.”*

All the while, as this admittedly unconventional scene is being described, the simple two-note piano riff continues, and while the melody itself begins to take some direction and add some colour, filling in other notes in the musical scale, this is all still accompanied by a series of chords that are also themselves ‘open 5ths’—naked, unadorned, ambiguous, empty of predetermined interpretation.

The music finally shifts and fills in as the lyrics reach beyond the scene-setting and into the central question: “where were you?”

*Where were you when everything was falling apart?
All my days were spent by the telephone that never rang.
And all I needed was a call that never came,
to the corner of 1st and Amistad.*

“Where were you?” *This* is the question that haunts, isn’t it?

It looms over our lives and it looms over this story from the Gospel of John that we know as the ‘raising of Lazarus’. This question is at least *part* of the reason that I have often been a bit troubled whenever I come around to our scripture reading for today. With that question looming over, I’ve found our story of the raising of Lazarus to be a bit like that open 5th piano riff—a little bit haunting, a little bit bare, a little bit wanting for something to be filled in.

You see, there is definitely part of me that wants to see this story as being a happy story

¹ This sermon is based on a sermon I previously wrote and preached on this passage while serving as the senior minister of the Storrs Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, in Storrs, Connecticut, United States.

overall—a good story, a story with a joyful ending. Indeed, the ending of the story appears to be much what we would hope for—Jesus raises Lazarus. Lazarus comes out of the tomb and is restored to life. We hear right at the end of the reading that many of the Judeans who saw this believed in Jesus because of it. If we were to read further on into chapter 12, we would next find Lazarus at the dinner table with Martha and Mary and Jesus. What more could we hope for from this story? Lazarus is alive... we hear Jesus' famous words that "I am the resurrection and the life"... people have come to believe.

And yet, somehow, I have always felt something of a shadow across this story. You say to me, 'oh, yes, the raising of Lazarus', and I don't think of trumpets and flowers and feel-good fairy tale trappings. Even seemingly less miraculous stories, like the feeding of the 5000, somehow seem to strike me with a happier tone.

Perhaps part of what seems haunting about this story is the fact that we never actually hear from Lazarus. We don't hear from him as he is beset with illness and approaching death. We don't hear any death cry from him. We don't even hear anything from him after he is raised out of that tomb, no muffled tones coming from inside those strips of cloth, no voice after he is unbound. Lazarus does not even speak later in John, when we find him at the dinner table with Mary, Martha, and Jesus—in fact, Jesus and Judas Iscariot are the only ones we hear from then.

So perhaps Lazarus's voice is like that missing third note in music's open 5th. Without that third note, we don't know if the music is major or minor, happy or sad, or perhaps even beset with the tension of some other combination seeking resolution. Open and bare—not a problem *per se*, but still asking for something more, something to be fleshed out.

Whether it is Lazarus's missing voice or something else that is troubling about this story, I certainly am not the first to find it a bit ponderous, or even ominous. In the history of the visual arts, like with many biblical scenes there have been many depictions—paintings and prints and sculptures—made of this famous story. What is remarkable, though, is how very few of them seem particularly joyful, even as Lazarus is raised and Jesus proclaims himself the resurrection and the life. Many are ominous and dark.

In famous early Baroque artist Caravaggio's depiction from the early 1600s, you can't even tell that Lazarus is alive again, as the others in the painting lift up a body that could just as well be a corpse.

About 150 years earlier, French painter Nicolas Froment shows us a Lazarus who, with eyes clearly open and alive, is so ghastly as to look pretty much like a Halloween skeleton with eyeballs.

One of the most famous paintings of our story is from the Italian Renaissance master Giotto. Giotto's picture is a bit like a multiple choice survey, offering up all of the possible notes that might fill out the open 5th chord that is this story, letting us decide which tonality or mood or feeling this story might evoke for us. You have the bystanders, the fellow Judeans from the town of Bethany, who look mostly amazed and astonished—except for one of them, who leans in with a puzzled look to examine Lazarus at close range. You have Jesus disciples, who stand by as spectators, looking relatively unmoved, perhaps even lukewarm. Two young cemetery attendants carry away the huge stone, not noticing or perhaps even ignoring what has happened. Jesus looks intense and "greatly disturbed", exactly as the gospel writer told us in the story. Lazarus himself? Well... he actually looks a bit peeved to be honest. One preacher commenting on the story and on this painting muses that we could almost imagine "hear[ing] the words of [Shakespeare's King] Lear on his cold lips—'You do me wrong to take me out of the grave.'"²

And then we see Mary and Martha, kneeling at Jesus feet. Perhaps they are worshipping

² John Pridmore, commentary for the 5th Sunday of Lent, Year A, in *The Word is Very Near You – Sundays: Reflections on the lectionary readings Years A, B & C* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009), p. 111.

Jesus in praise and thanksgiving. Or perhaps they are still voicing their plea, “Oh Lord, if only you had been here...” Really I think it is *this*—Martha and Mary’s plea—which rings through, haunting this whole story. It is the refrain that the band The Fray keeps coming back to in their song:

*Lost and insecure, you found me, you found me,
Lying on the floor, surrounded, surrounded,
Why’d you have to wait? Where were you? Where were you?
Just a little late, you found me, you found me...*

I dare say that this is the refrain that comes back and haunts so much of our lives, as well. Why did Jesus wait two days before going to see Lazarus? Where was God when...? It is the age-old question, after all.

I am not here today to tell you that I have discovered some new answer to that age-old question that has troubled generations of faithful people wiser and more devout than me. But I wonder if perhaps part of the challenge of the question is that it is not, ultimately, the question that lies at the core—the most important question, the question we need answered. I remember one of my professors and mentors in seminary telling a class something like, “when someone asks ‘why did this happen?’, *that* is not the question they really want answered. Really, there *is* no answer to that question. When they ask ‘why did this happen?’, what they *really* are asking is ‘how can I go on living, now that it has?’”³

And that, my friends, is the frame set by this story, I believe. The story of the raising of Lazarus is not a story about *preventing* death, or even about pretending it doesn’t happen. Jesus comes not that we might have magical life, but that we might have *new* life. The story is filled with the symbols of death: “intense grief, a skeptical and somewhat impatient audience, the odour of a decaying body, the tightly wrapped grave clothes.”⁴ And yet it is *in the midst* of these symbols—*not* in their absence—that Jesus calls out Lazarus’s name, commands him out of the tomb, and welcomes him into life again.

So it is with us.

The symbols and images of death are all around us. And yet, it is in the midst of them—not in their absence—that Jesus proclaims his promise that he is the resurrection *and the life...* the life here, now, in our midst, not in some far away time and place. It is in the midst of the chaos, the dry bones, the weeping tears that God acts.

The open 5th is set, that B and that F sharp echo around. Haunting and bare they are. Until God calls *your* name, calls *you* out of the tomb, brings *you* to new life, commands *us all* to unbind you from your death bands and let you go. And there, in the midst of that open 5th, the note finally comes, the frame is finally filled, the music is fleshed out:

Doo (B) - Doo (F#) – Dooooo (D#).
I (B) – *Found* (F#) – **God** (D#).

Amen!

³ The Rev. Dr. W. Dow Edgerton, United Church of Christ pastor and long-time professor of ministry at the Chicago Theological Seminary.

⁴ Charles B. Cousar, commentary on the text for the 5th Sunday of Lent, in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), p. 226.