

Fragile as a Bubble
(Preached for a Sermon for Every Sunday)
Lent 5, Year C – April 3, 2022
Focal Text: John 12:1-8
(Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14)

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. This is the refrain that hangs in the air as each person is marked with ashes as churches around the world gather together to worship and to remember our shared mortality. On Ash Wednesday followers of Jesus received a smudge of ashes on their foreheads (ashes traditionally made by burning the palm leaves from the previous year's Palm Sunday celebration). It has been a few years since I've led worship for Ash Wednesday, but, I can keenly picture the faces of those I was blessed to serve as minister – the faces of people of every age, infants to nonagenarians - the stain of ashes on my thumb -one stroke and then another, creating the shape of the cross. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

This season we are in the thick of now is one that confronts our mortality head on. Death is part of our living. To be human is to live, and, to die.

When I was younger, I needed that reminder more than I do now. As if the process of aging doesn't make us more aware of our own mortality, a global pandemic still killing over a thousand citizens of our nation daily, will certainly make us aware. Pain, suffering, death, and the grief of loss is an inescapable part

of being human – it is our shared experience – and like never before, we find ourselves aware that life can fall apart in the blink of an eye.

Surviving the pandemic of her time, Julian of Norwich heard a message from God, saying, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” Yet, having seen over half of the people of her city die of Bubonic Plague, she could not conceive how all manner of things could be well. In the face of so much pain, suffering, and death she said, “it seemed to me impossible that every kind of thing should be well.”

In our gospel story for today, Jesus has come to the home of his friends: Mary, Martha and Lazarus – people with fresh knowledge of pain, suffering, and death. These three siblings live in the town of Bethany, which is just outside of Jerusalem – where Jesus will go a few days later and where he will spend the last week of his life. As good friends and hosts do, they welcome Jesus and those he’s travelling with into their home to enjoy a meal. So far, this sounds like a completely normal, routine, everyday kind of occurrence.

But, there are some notable, unspoken, things going on behind this scene. For one thing, just a few days before this hospitable gathering, Lazarus was dead in the grave. He had fallen ill and his sisters sent word for Jesus to come to help. But before Jesus did so, Lazarus died. His sisters performed the ceremonial preparation of his body for burial – anointing it with oil and wrapping it in bands

of cloth. They mourned. They placed his body in a tomb. Four days passed before Jesus arrived to find Mary and Martha inconsolable, weeping in their grief, and being cared for by their community. The sisters met him on the road with all their grief-stricken feelings and questions, saying to him, “If you’d been here, he wouldn’t have died. Where were you? Don’t you care? How could you let this happen? What took you so long?”

Jesus asked them a question of his own, “Do you believe in the resurrection?” “Yes,” they said, “yes – of course we believe in resurrection at the end of days – but, how does that help us now?” The present pain of their loss was unbearable.

At the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus wept for his dead friend too. Then, he commanded the tomb be opened and called his friend to come out. Miracle of miracles, Lazarus walked out of the tomb alive again.

You see, this dinner party isn’t really very normal at all.

This family had lived resurrection. Their weeping had been turned into shouts of joy. What was dead was restored to life. They have lived through their own Easter moment, which was thoroughly good and worthy of celebration...except, for all those of us whose sorrow and loss have not yet been so dramatically restored. For us, this promise of a good future may do little to make our present reality any more bearable.

Kate Bowler talks about this in her memoir, *Everything Happens*. Kate was a successful historian and professor at Duke Divinity School. She was 35-years-old and doing what she loved – about to write a book – and enjoying being a wife and mother to her young son. One moment she was giving a lecture, and the next, she was receiving the diagnosis of an advanced and aggressive cancer. She says that she quickly realized, “life is as fragile as a soap bubble.”

Kate reflects beautifully on how this crisis ignited a hyper-awareness within her, that she became more fully present in her life. And, while devastated by the reality that she very well may not live long enough to live in her son’s memories, she found herself primarily and overwhelmingly feeling love. It became apparent all around her, and, it sustained her.

Kate reflects on this experience, saying, “The terrible gift of a terrible illness, is that it has, in fact, taught me to live in the moment. Nothing but this day matters. The warmth of this crib. The sound of his hysterical giggling. And when I look closely at my life I realize that I am not just learning to seize the day. In my finite life, the mundane has begun to sparkle. The things I love – the things I should love – become clearer. Brighter...Everything in the world just breaks apart – like you’re looking at life like a shirt that’s inside out and you see all the seams - then all of a sudden in all the jagged seams there’s just so much beauty in the world. You notice your pain, but then you notice everybody else’s – the person

struggling to reach something and the person that helps them; the person in the cancer clinic smoothing their mom's hair; and in all those moments it feels like you just get flooded by how fragile and gorgeous and ridiculous life is.”

This hyper-awareness of the love present all around her is something she hopes to never lose, especially as her mortality becomes less of a focus of her living. Over these seven years since she was diagnosed, she's largely chosen to keep living her life the way she did before the crisis of her diagnosis. She began writing that book, knowing it may very well go unfinished. She chose to keep doing the things she loved, with the people she loved, for as long as she was alive – to be fully present to her life. No major changes, she simply lived. Only more aware and attentive to the beauty of it all.

At that dinner party, there was an intensity, and urgency, a hyper-awareness in the room too. You see, not only had they experienced illness, death, and resurrection but they also now lived with knowledge of another looming death. The resurrection of Lazarus had drawn the attention of the power-players of the day and this is the moment they decided Jesus must die. They put a bounty on his head and put plans in place to arrest him. They started spreading the word that anyone who knows his whereabouts should tip them off.

Everyone in the room at this dinner party knows this. The threat of Jesus' death is hanging in the air as thickly as the smell of the oil Mary pours out to anoint his body.

Mary, Martha, Lazarus and Jesus' experience of death and grief was so very fresh in their minds, bodies, and souls. Even having lived resurrection, they know they aren't spared the loss of grief. They know what lies ahead for Jesus and they know it will break their hearts. Lazarus, Martha and Mary, like Julian and Kate, and so very many of us know, that "life is as fragile as a soap bubble." In a world with such deep sorrow, how can anything, let alone all things, be made well?

In her grief at the pain of the world, Julian spent fifteen years in prayer and study striving to understand what God meant by God's message that "All shall be well, all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be made well." The truth she discerned was this: "know it well, love has meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For love. Remain in this, and you will know more of the same. But you will never know different, without end. So I was taught that love is our Lord's meaning."

Love is our Lord's meaning. This is a truth Julian, Kate, and Mary are whispering to us today – in whatever our present moment of pain, suffering, death, and grief of loss – love is the way by which all things are made well, by the One who is Love, for the sake of love.

From dust we come and to dust we shall return and love will sustain us through everything in between.

The question is, knowing life is as fragile as a soap bubble, how then will the three siblings choose to live?

Well, not entirely unlike how they lived before. Lazarus has opened his home before as he does now. Standing among them, a living testament to abundant life in the face of death. Martha has busied herself with preparing and serving a meal – showing her love and care by providing nourishment as she always has. Mary has sat at Jesus’ feet before – soaking in the moment, his presence, his teachings.

Yet, this time, her actions show the heightened intensity of this moment. She’s even more aware and attentive of how fragile, and gorgeous, and ridiculous life is. Mary has seen what she has seen, and knows what she knows, and she holds nothing back when it comes to pouring love out on Jesus. She is fully present in the moment because she knows this moment will not last forever. Not a second of attention, a drop of oil, or a bit of love will be held back.

Fully present and generously giving love to Jesus. Who, by the way, affirms her unusual and extravagant actions, not just with his words in the room that evening, but, with every action of his life. Fully present and giving love. This is the way of Jesus, the way we seek to follow.

And now one question remains for us, given that life can fall apart in an instant, how then shall we live?

May Julian and Kate, Lazarus and Martha, and Mary and Jesus show us the way. Amen.

© Rev. Mandy England Cole, 2022

