

When Life Stinketh

Laurie Haas

 *John 11:17-44*

Did you see the movie *The Princess Bride*? This is one of my favorite movies. It is a story about a farmhand named Westley who is on a journey to rescue his true love Princess Buttercup from the odious Prince Humperdinck. At one point in the adventure, when Westley's companions rescue him from Humperdinck's henchmen, they are afraid that Westley is dead. They take him to Mad Max, a folk healer, played by Billy Crystal, who declares Westley only "mostly dead." He says, "There's a big difference between mostly dead and all dead. Mostly dead is slightly alive. All dead, well with all dead, there's usually only one thing you can do." Yes, what is that? "Go through his clothes and look for loose change."

Well Lazarus is all dead. And do you know how we know that? Well let's dust off our King James Version of the Bible. I don't use King James often, but I love its rendering of the raising of Lazarus. Jesus, after weeping and being emotionally moved, commands those around him to open Lazarus' tomb.

There's instant protest. Lazarus had been dead for a few days, and everyone knew that rolling that stone away wouldn't be pretty.

Now here's the King James version and take another look at this sotry.: Martha calls out: But Lord, he stinketh!

Stinketh! What a great word. I've been using it all week.

We can imagine this odor, right? We've all had raw chicken in our frig a few too many days. Or how about a dead rat in your attic? Have you ever had that experience? A few days in the attic at 150 degrees in the summer, not enough to cook it, just enough to make it stinketh - a lot!

And how did Lazarus get into this condition? Well, he got sick, like many of us do. Mary and Martha had sent a message to their friend Jesus. "Lord, he whom you love is ill." Mary, Martha and Lazarus are probably Jesus' closest friends. But Jesus didn't come right when he was called. He was too late and Lazarus died.

Both sisters lamented, "If only you had been here!" On a courageous day, I would be saying, "Where the heck were you?!" On a normal day, I would be saying the same thing...only difference is that I would be saying it under my breath.

Whether aloud or under our breath, don't we find ourselves asking the same question of God from time to time? Where the heck were you?

Jesus told his disciples that Lazarus is dead. And only then does he decide to go to nearby Bethany. Jesus arrives on the fourth day. The day that is beyond all hope.

All through Scripture, the third day is the day that God acts. On the third day, God descends to Mount Sinai and reveals the 10 Commandments. On the third day, Joshua's spies emerge from hiding; on the third day, famines end for King David and later for Elijah. On the third day, Jonah is expelled from the belly of the great fish. On the third day, Queen Esther ends her fast and approaches the king to save her people. On the third day, Jesus rose again from the dead.

And when does Jesus mosey into town to see Lazarus? He arrives on the hopeless, fourth day. The One who is "the resurrection and the life" is weeping for his dead friend Lazarus. This does not look good. This definitely does not look hopeful.

I would like to camp out for just a bit in these feelings of hope and hopelessness to wonder together what we might learn from this seventh and final sign in the Gospel of John - which is of course, Jesus actually raising Lazarus from the dead. But Mary and Martha were expecting Jesus to come and heal their brother. So when He didn't come in time

and Lazarus died, they are deep in their grief. The situation seemed hopeless.

When life is going well, it's easy to feel hopeful isn't it? When we are healthy, our kids and grandkids are healthy and are getting into good schools, when we have travel plans, a tee time and a dinner reservation with a great early bird special...when life is good, it's easy to feel hopeful about today and the future.

But what about when life stinketh? Just this week, right here in Florida, there was another shooting at a school, where beautiful young teenagers had their lives brutally stolen from them. We have all endured broken relationships and betrayals from people who were supposed to be our friends. Many of us have been touched by cancer either in ourselves or in those we love or other illnesses and accidents and heartbreak. It is in these moments of life, when feelings of hopelessness can seep into our soul like a dense fog.

In fact, I think it might be hopelessness that drives people to the rocky cliff in Sydney Australia, known as The Gap. This is the most notorious suicide destination in all of Australia. Yet even in this desperate place, there is a bit of hope shining through a couple named Don and Moya Ritchie.

The Ritchies have lived in a home near this suicide spot for almost 50 years. Every morning Mr. Ritchie wakes up and looks out the window to see if anyone is standing alone too close to the edge of the cliff. If he senses someone may be contemplating suicide, he would slowly walk across the road to them. At the cliff-edge he would simply smile and ask them, "Can I help you in some way?" More often than not the

quiet approach worked. Afterwards he would invite them back to his home for a cup of tea and a chat.

His ambition has always been to just get them away from the edge, to buy them time, to give them the opportunity to reflect and give them the chance to realize that things might look better the next morning.

Mr. Ritchie said, "Never underestimate the power of a kind word and a smile." His calm voice and compassionate manner must have looked and sounded a bit like Jesus. A cup of hope.

In Japanese, the word Nozomi means "hope." On March 11, 2011 an earthquake that measured a 9 on the Richter scale shook northeastern Japan, unleashing a savage tsunami. Thousands of homes were destroyed and nearly 20,000 lives were lost.

Japanese and American Christians came to the devastated area to lend a hand and to help these people begin to rebuild their lives. One day, as they were cleaning up a park, they noticed many pieces of broken pottery from plates and cups - and they wondered, "What if we could make something beautiful from this devastation?"

The Nozomi Project was born. It is a faith-based social enterprise that brings sustainable income, community, dignity and hope to the women in Ishinomaki by training them to craft high-quality jewelry products. Nozomi women have lost either their home or a member of their immediate family. Together, they are creating one-of-a-kind pieces of jewelry featuring broken pieces of pottery left in the wake of the tsunami. I am wearing a Nozomi piece of jewelry that was given to me by a dear friend in

“... God uses each one of us to reach out our hands in creativity and kindness, to bring beauty out of brokenness...”

this congregation...which is how I learned about this ministry.

Along with a core value of generosity, they have chosen three key words to describe the Nozomi Project: community, restoration, and hope. Beauty from brokenness. Shards of hope.

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” I promise to give you abundant life, just follow me. And darn-if Jesus didn’t start walking to Jerusalem, straight towards his death. By following Jesus, we are not spared from suffering, we join him in it.

Which means, we are never alone! Martha encourages us to believe that God is the one who moves into the world—with all of its darkness, brokenness and grief. Martha reminds us that even in unanswered questions and unmet requests, we are not alone.

It’s like being stuck in Seoul, South Korea during the rainy monsoon season. Day after day, week after week, the same dreary gray skies, winds and rain shroud the city. You can feel like the whole world is closing in on you. But then someone came up with a brilliant plan to infuse a bit of hope. They painted the streets with a special hydrochromatic paint that can only be seen when it’s wet. When life feels its most gloomy, the streets are their most colorful. A splash of hope.

Just as Mary and Martha showed us...even in our grief, we can still hope. The Apostle Paul reminds us brothers and sisters in Christ, “We do not grieve as others do who have no hope.” Jesus does not promise physical life without physical death. He promises an experience of abundant life that swallows up the sting of death. We join the prophet Hosea when he says, “Where O death is your victory, where is your sting?”

This does not mean that we won’t have times or seasons that are especially challenging where our hope is running on empty. Where we need

our community of faith, our tribe to hold us up - breathing hope into our weary souls. If you are in that situation, where life is feeling hopeless, I would like to encourage you to just ask God for the very thing you most need. Ask God to renew you with a new dose of hope. You know, when we are sick, we take medicine to lessen the pain and to feel better. When 4 to 6 hours have passed, if we still have the symptoms, we take another dose of medication. Likewise we have to keep turning back to God to get another dose of hope. And I don’t know about you, but I have found it helpful to stay open to God reaching into our lives in a variety of ways, because we just aren’t meant to do life alone. And God will stop at nothing to reach us!

Anthony Britton is a magician who was attempting to mimic a “Buried Alive” stunt that Harry Houdini himself had tried, but failed. Basically for this stunt, you are buried beneath 6 feet of dirt. If this isn’t bad enough, before they start dumping buckets of dirt on you, they handcuff your hands and shackle your legs. I can barely breathe just thinking about it. Well just like Houdini, Anthony Britton was unable to dig his way out. He almost died, needing to be extricated from the grave and revived by paramedics.

Here is Britton’s account of the experience: “To start off with, it’s painful. There’s no coffin there, there’s no casket — nothing there to protect your body. I remember the first bucket of soil hit me — it was a bit of a shock. ... Each bucket that went on to you — obviously the crushing that is coming from the front, you know, underneath you. It’s coming from the sides of you, it’s going on top of you.

For some reason, I think the soil shifted or something, and I got my right arm trapped. It was trapped between my body and the actual soil itself. So, at that point, it was, “Crikey, I can’t move my right arm.”

Anyway, I felt myself going unconscious, and I was just trying to focus on, “You’ve got to do this, you’ve

got to escape the grave.”

But you know, it just got to the point where I’d given it my entire best shot. I had nothing left in my body. ... I could feel myself going under. At that point, everyone (his tribe) knew exactly what to do — and they got to me as quick as they could.

Anthony Britton couldn’t escape his “grave” by himself, any more than Lazarus could or than you or I can. Yet, God does not leave us alone. God reaches us through music, through silence, through his Word. God reaches us through sunsets and birds singing, through dogs and even cats. And of course God uses each one of us to reach out our hands in creativity and kindness, to bring beauty out of brokenness: to help dig our neighbor out of the rubble of life: to show up, to give a gentle smile, a listening ear, a cup of tea...offering God’s love and hope for all the times when life stinketh.



When Life Stinketh

Laurie Haas
February 18, 2018

