
What does new life look like anyway?
Martin Grove United Church
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Based on Ezekiel 37:1-14 and John 11:1-45

After their father dies, Gus and his brother, Lars, inherit the family home. Gus moves into the house with his wife Karin while Lars moves into the garage. Lars is a gentle, quiet soul, but he is a social recluse. Lars has a job, and attends church regularly, but he finds personal interactions awkward even in those familiar places. Lars seems happy enough, but he seems disconnected too. Therefore, Gus and Karin are delighted when Lars announces that he has a female friend visiting him. Lars and his friend Bianca - who he met on The Internet - do not feel right staying together in the garage unmarried, and so Bianca moves into the house with Gus and Karin.

Bianca, a former nurse and missionary cannot walk, and needs a wheelchair, but Gus and Karin accommodate her. Over time, Bianca gets involved with the whole community. She attends church, she volunteers at the hospital and in the school. She works part-time in a clothing store.

And it's a funny thing - as Bianca becomes more involved in the community, so does Lars. Lars engages more deeply in the community where he has lived his whole life. Lars becomes more sociable when he's with Bianca. He becomes much less reclusive. Bianca's presence brings out the presence of Lars in new ways. Bianca brought new life to Lars, and in many ways, to the whole community. Of course, that new life was always in Lars, but Bianca helped to bring it out. How do I know that the new life was already in Lars and that Bianca did not bring new energy into the mix? Because Bianca is in fact a life-size inflatable doll.

At least that's how it happened in the 2007 movie *Lars and the Real Girl*. When Lars first brought Bianca to meet Gus and Karin, they had no idea what to do. Gus assumed that Lars was crazy and that perhaps Lars should be put in an institution. But when they consulted with a psychiatrist, Gus and Karin were encouraged to live the delusion with Lars - to act as if Bianca was a real person. In order to help Lars, the

congregation in Lars's church lived into Lars's delusion too. By the end of the movie, the whole town is living as if Bianca was a real person. And that's how the transformation of Lars happened. That's how Lars received new life. That's how the whole community found new life.

New life happens in strange ways. New life happens in ways we cannot imagine. That's why the image on the bulletin covers shows a weed growing out of a driveway. When we think of new life and spring, you might think of flowers, but new life comes in many forms - some unexpected - some unwanted. But new life cannot be stopped.

Agnes has her own story. Born in Macedonia to an Albanian family, as a child Agnes became fascinated by stories of missionaries, and their service in Bengal. In her adult life, she went on to provide missionary service herself as a teacher, working in a variety of places, including Calcutta.

But the combination of famine, poverty, and war at the time drove Calcutta into a reality of despair and horror. And in that situation, Agnes found new life. For her, new life was in the form of a call to work with poor people, and she left the comforts of teaching in order to live with the poor that she worked to help.

Her project started very slowly because of limited resources. But as her ministry took hold and more and more people shared her vision - it expanded. Agnes's work with the poor started with a group of 13 people, and by the time of her death in 1997, there were over 4000 members running shelters worldwide, caring for the poor, the diseased, refugees, alcoholics, the elderly, victims of disasters, and other problems.

All that new life came from Agnes's response to the suffering of people in her neighbourhood. And her own life changed too along the way. Born as "Agnes", she died as Mother Teresa. The new life of her vision remains with us today.

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[ask: when have you seen new life in strange ways?]

In our readings from scripture today we are presented with other visions of new life. The Ezekiel passage speaks about old bones getting new flesh and being re-

animated. And in John, Jesus brings a dead friend - Lazarus - back to life after being dead for 4 days. These are stories we usually read as if they are about new life. And yet, in both Ezekiel and in John, the stories are about going backwards in time - about going back to an earlier time when people - who are now dead - used to be alive. The stories are actually about continuing to live, not really about new life. New life is always unpredictable, so it can never be about going back to the past. New life happens in ways we cannot imagine, like the new life that came from treating an inflatable doll as if it were real, or the new life that happened when 1 person decided to live with people as they suffered and died.

However - I don't want to sell John short. Because part of John's story is actually about new life. The story of the raising of Lazarus leaves me with a few questions. Why is it that a story as amazing as raising the dead Lazarus would appear only in the gospel of John? Matthew, Mark, and Luke don't mention it at all. Surely, such a miracle would have been recorded in all the gospels. I wonder why the story is only in John?

And for another thing - in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the event that proves to be the catalyst that leads to Jesus's arrest is the overturning of the tables in the temple. Criticizing the temple system was the straw that broke the camel's back - that gave the religious leaders enough leverage to finally arrest Jesus in spite of his popularity. John records that story too but for John the temple event comes at the start of Jesus's public ministry - all the way back in chapter 2. In John, it is the raising of Lazarus that leads to Jesus's arrest. Why was the raising of Lazarus so important to John? Why was the raising of Lazarus so important to the community that it led to Jesus's arrest? I think the story is talking about new life in a way that goes far beyond the life in Lazarus's body.

Recall that the gospel of John was the last gospel to be written. It was likely written around 125 AD. That's almost 100 years after Jesus's death. And over those years, the group that considered themselves followers of Jesus had evolved from a Jewish sect into something new. One clue that John was written so late is in the story we just read, because John keeps referring to friends and associates as "the Jews". For example, John says, "many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother". John would not have said that unless the Jesus followers were now considered

to be beyond the bounds of Judaism. The Jesus movement had become something new. They had found new life. Well, that's probably the strangest story yet. The story that new life - and a new community - grew out of the death of an unemployed, homeless spiritual teacher.

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Since this is Lent, I assume we are all looking for new life to appear. But that makes me wonder - what would new life look like - here - today. Lars and Agnes and Lazarus have their own stories, but we have our own story too.

Individually and as a community, what new life are you looking for? What new life are you hoping for? Lent is a time to create and share visions of new life. Lent is a chance to re-think who we really are and who we want to be. Lent is a time to listen deeply to each other. Lent is a time to listen deeply to God. Lent is a time to listen deeply to ourselves. Lent is a time to imagine new life. And when we find that glimmer of new life, will we fully embrace that new life? Are we willing to relinquish control of our own ideas enough to open our hearts and minds to new life, new possibilities and new relationships? Are we open to a future that is different than the past - the same way that Lars and Agnes discovered lives that they could not have imagined? Or are we simply trying to hang onto and preserve our image of who we have been.

Fortunately, we don't need to imagine new life, we just have to be open, and take a chance and embrace new life in whatever ways we find it. Lars and Agnes could not have predicted how their lives would have turned out, and we don't need to either.

Lent is a time to discover and celebrate new life. I invite each of us to share our stories of new life with each other in the coming weeks as we prepare for Easter.

New life happens in strange ways. New life happens in ways we cannot imagine. Thank be to God for that!

Amen.