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What does new life look like anyway?  
Wesley Mimico United Church  
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

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 interesting - as Bianca gets 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 some 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 anything new into the mix? Because Bianca is in fact a full-size inflatable dummy of a woman.

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 psychologist, Gus and Karin were encouraged to live the

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delusion with Lars - to act as if Bianca were a real person. By the end of the movie, the whole town is living as if Bianca were a real person. And that's how the transformation within Lars happened. That's how Lars received new life. That's how the whole community found new life.

New life happens in strange ways. I like Lars's story, perhaps not because it is so strange, but because it is so normal.

One thing is clear: new life happens in ways we can't imagine.

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 members, 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 many others.

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.

One thing is clear: new life happens in ways we can't imagine.

In our readings from scripture today we are presented with other visions of new life. The Ezekiel passage explicitly speaks about old bones getting new flesh and new life. And in John, Jesus brings a dead friend - Lazarus - back to life after being dead for 4 days. I don't know about you, but I'm not sure if those stories are really strange, or if strange stories of new life are just normal. Is the idea of bones growing new flesh any

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harder to make sense of than the idea that new life might come to a community from an inflatable doll? Or that new life might come from being with other people as they suffer?

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 it 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.

One thing is clear: new life happens in ways we can't imagine.

And these stories make me wonder - what does new life look like, anyway? What would it look like to us? What would it look like in this community? Lars and Agnes and Lazarus have their stories of new life - but we have our own.

We are on at least 2 journeys right now. One journey is the journey of Lent. 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 consider - in what ways would Jesus challenge our own power systems? [*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.

The other journey has all the same features. It is a journey that also invites us into new life. It is a journey that invites us into new relationships. It is a journey that invites us into deep relationships. It is the journey that this congregation is on that has at least 4 stages: moving out of this building, moving and living into transitional space, finishing

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our building redevelopment project, and then moving and living into our new, permanent space.

Throughout this congregational journey, we are being invited into new life, new possibilities, new relationships. 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.

One thing is clear: new life happens in ways we can't imagine.

Fortunately, we don't need to imagine the ways, 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 any more than we can predict the outcome of the journey that this congregation is on, but we *can* celebrate new life as we find.

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 only happens in ways we can't imagine. Thank be to God for that!

*Amen.*