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What does new life look like anyway?  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
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Based on 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 Lars 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*.

[slide: lars and bianca]

When Lars first brought Bianca to meet Gus and Karin, they had no idea what to do.

[slide: karen and gus]

Gus assumed that Lars was crazy and that perhaps Lars should be put in an institution.

But when they consulted with a doctor,

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[slide: bianca and doctor]

Gus and Karin were encouraged to live the delusion with Lars - to act as if Bianca was a real person.

[slide: bianca at church]

In order to help Lars, the congregation in Lars's church lived into Lars's delusion too.

[slide: bianca outside church]

By the end of the movie, the whole town is living as if Bianca was a real person.

[slide: bianca getting her hair done]

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 emerged when Lars and the whole community pretended that Bianca was real. And the community agreed to the project because they saw how Lars was living a new more hopeful life.

New life happens in strange ways. New life happens in ways we cannot imagine.

[slide: weed in driveway]

That's why the image for the week shows a weed growing out of a driveway. When we think of new life - particularly in spring, you might think of flowers, or plants that you love, or perhaps baby animals. And those are nice. But new life comes in many forms - some unexpected - some unwanted, like weeds. The important thing about new life is that it cannot be stopped. New life is irrepressible and comes from unexpected places.

I'm reminded of the story of Agnes. 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

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were over 4000 members running shelters worldwide, caring for the poor, the diseased, refugees, alcoholics, the elderly, victims of disasters, and other people who needed help.

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.

New life happens in strange ways. New life sometimes happens in ways we cannot predict and could never imagine.

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

In our readings from John today we are presented with a vision of new life. In the story Jesus brings a dead friend - Lazarus - back to life after being dead for 4 days. This is a story we usually read as if it are about new life. And yet the story is actually about going backwards in time - about going back to an earlier time when a person who is now dead used to be alive. The story is actually about continuing a past life, 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 a real girl, 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. But first, the story of the raising of Lazarus leaves me with a few questions. For one thing, why is it that a story as amazing as raising the dead Lazarus appears 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 in John the temple event comes at the start of Jesus's public

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ministry - all the way back in chapter 2. In John, the story that leads to Jesus's arrest is the raising of Lazarus. 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 of the physical body of Lazarus.

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". Given that all the players in this story were Jewish, why would John label some of them as "the Jews"? John would not have said that unless the Jesus followers were now considered to be outside the bounds of Judaism. The Jesus movement had become something new. They had found new life. And, that's probably the strangest story yet. The story that new life - a the largest religion in the world - grew out of the death of an unemployed, homeless spiritual teacher.

New life happens in strange ways. New life happens in ways we cannot imagine.

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 there own stories, but we have our own story too.

Individually and as a community, what new life are we 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 found lives that they could not have imagined? Or are we simply trying to hang onto and

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preserve our image of who we have been.

I sense we might have a bit of a conflict right now. On the one hand, I'm trying to preach about the gift of unexpected new life that we supposedly yearn for during lent. On the other hand, I suspect that many of us are not the least bit interested in looking for new experiences right now - most of us probably just want to go back to the life we had before coronavirus. We probably want to live the life we had just a few months ago rather than looking for new visions and new opportunities. Well, I understand that too. I can honestly tell you that in October when I agreed to come to Sydenham-Heritage United Church, our current reality is not exactly what I thought I was signing up for.

If you are yearning for the life you had a few months ago, let me ask you this. A few months ago did you realize and act as if you were living the dream? Probably not, it was just "normal" life, right? And yet, now we realize how good it was. Perhaps - even today - that is still true. Today, we are living the dream even as we resist it. Perhaps six months from now we will be looking back on how great our lives are right now because we were so free to experiment in worship!

Because not only is new life unexpected, it is usually unappreciated at the time too. Consider today. We have each other. We have the presence of God. What more do we need? We do not need to imagine new life, we just have to live it. We do not 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. We just need the openness - as a congregation and as individuals - to live into the opportunities that God presents us with.

Besides that, I'm overstating this a bit anyway. Church has always been about relationships, and meeting both our authentic selves and God as we reach out to help others. That doesn't need to change. What brings us together is not really changing. Only the details and ways that we connect are changing.

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.*