



Faith Beyond Despair

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Year C, Ordinary Sunday 32

Job 19:23–27; Luke 20:27–38

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In the last couple of weeks, something sacred happened quietly.

Phyllis Tribble died.

If you don't know her name, that's okay; she wasn't famous in the way some theologians are. But her work rippled out through the church and through classrooms and pulpits like ours, shaping a generation of readers who learned to trust that the Bible could still speak truth, even painful truth, and that the truth could set us free.

Phyllis was a biblical scholar, one of the first women to teach Old Testament at Union Theological Seminary in New York. She was born in Virginia in 1932, the daughter of a Baptist minister, and grew up in a world where women were told, politely, to stay quiet in church.

It is safe to say, she did not stay quiet.

Her work, especially *Texts of Terror*, asked us to look at the stories the church had ignored, the stories of women who suffer violence and erasure: Hagar, Tamar, the daughter of Jephthah, and the unnamed concubine from Judges. Phyllis called them "texts of terror," not because she wanted to shock us, but because she wanted us to listen. She said, "*Silence is the sign of horror, but speech is the beginning of healing.*"

That line has stayed with me throughout my studies.

It feels like both a lament and a commission, especially for those of us who come to this pulpit as women still finding our voices. When I first read Tribble's work, I was a biblical studies student trying to find my footing, someone who loved Scripture but also struggled with it, who wanted to believe that these ancient words could still make space for my voice. And what she offered me was not comfort but courage. She taught that lament is a form of faith. That protest, when done honestly, can be a kind of praise. That telling the truth, even when it hurts, is an act of reverence.

And so it feels fitting that the lectionary gives us Job this week. Job, sitting in the ashes, stripped of almost everything, whispering: "I know that my Redeemer lives." Not as a song of triumph, but as a stubborn declaration from the ruins. Job's friends keep offering tidy theology. They try to make sense of the suffering, to defend God, to fix what can't be fixed. But Job doesn't want explanations; he wants honesty. He wants presence. He refuses to accept a faith that cannot make space for pain.

That's the kind of faith Phyllis Tribble taught too, one that refuses to smooth the rough edges, that holds the grief and the grace together in the same breath. Because real faith, she said, isn't about certainty; it's about relationship. And relationships, especially with God, can include tears, anger, silence, and hope. When Job says, "*I know that my Redeemer lives,*" he's not saying, "Everything happens for a reason." He's saying, "Even now, even here, I will trust that there is something alive beyond my despair." It's the cry of someone who won't let suffering be the final word. And in that, he joins company with Phyllis, and with every person who has ever dared to speak into silence.

Then, in Luke's gospel, we find Jesus in an argument, not with his friends but with the Sadducees. They come to him with a trick question: "A woman is widowed, and by custom she marries her husband's brothers, one after another. In the resurrection, whose wife will she be?" It's a test. But it's also a window into a world where a woman's life is treated like a property dispute.

And Jesus does not take the bait. He refuses to turn the mystery of life into a legal puzzle. He says, “You’re missing the point. Resurrection isn’t about who belongs to whom. It’s about belonging to God. And God is not God of the dead, but of the living, for to God, all of them are alive.” To God, all of them are alive. I love that Jesus names the woman in their story, the one being passed from one man to the next, as alive to God. He doesn’t argue about ownership; instead, he affirms her being. Phyllis Tribble spent her whole life doing that, lifting up the ones Scripture and tradition had passed over, and saying, “She matters. Her story is alive.” And that, I think, is the heart of resurrection. Resurrection is not simply the undoing of death. It is the refusal to let anything, or anyone, be forgotten.

To God, all are alive:
The women in the margins of Genesis.
The children caught in cycles of violence.
The earth itself, groaning under the weight of our neglect.
The friends we have lost.
Even the parts of ourselves we thought were gone.

All are alive to God.

One of Phyllis’s later essays ends with these words: “The Word of God is not locked in the past. It is the living voice that calls us into new life.” She believed the Spirit was still speaking, through ancient texts, through silenced voices, through ordinary people doing the slow, brave work of hope. That’s resurrection. And that’s why I love this pairing of Job and Jesus so much.

Job says, “Even in despair, there is life.”
Jesus says, “To God, all are alive.”

Together, they form a kind of conversation across time, the lament of one and the assurance of the other.

And that, I think, is what faith really is: not certainty, but dialogue. Not an answer, but a conversation between our pain and God's promise, between human lament and divine love. So where do we see that conversation today?

In the people rebuilding their lives after loss.
In the communities working to heal the land.
In the church learning, slowly, imperfectly, to listen to the voices it once silenced.

Phyllis Tribble once said that reading Scripture is like wrestling; we don't always win, but we're changed by the struggle.

And that's true of faith itself.
We wrestle. We lament. We hope.
And through it all, we are made new.

So today, as we remember her life, and as we listen to Job's defiant faith and Jesus' bold proclamation, may we also hear our own invitation:

To live.
To speak.
To keep telling the truth, even when our voice trembles.

Because the God who met Job in the ashes,
the God who met Jesus in the grave,
is still meeting us here and now,
breathing life into dust, whispering:
To me, all of you are alive.