

The Resurrected

Exodus 37: 1-10

John 11: 17-44

Death is the ultimate reality of human existence. Every living thing dies. Lent is the time in the church year when we are invited to specifically contemplate our own mortality. And yet, here we are, deep in the middle of Lent, and the lectionary brings us two stories of resurrection. The prophet Ezekiel wonders upon a valley of dry bones that represent the people of Israel. The imagery is that of a battlefield. The Babylonians had invaded their land, laid siege to their city, slaughtered their soldiers, burned the temple to the ground, and forced the survivors to live as exiles in Babylon. And even in the midst of this trauma, God tells Ezekiel that Israel will have new life, that these dry bones can rise again, that they will return to their home. This is a story of hope and new life for an entire people who has been overrun by war.

Then, in the gospel of John, we have a story of an individual resurrection. Lazarus, Jesus' friend had died and Jesus brings him new life. Two stories – one collective, one individual, that offers a resurrection hope – that even when the very worst thing has happened, there is still reason to hope. That's a message that continues to resonate with us thousands of years later especially when we find ourselves in times where we are confronted with death or hopelessness.

In our funeral liturgy, we offer this prayer, "Speak to us once more your solemn message of life and death. Help us to live as those who are prepared to die. And when our days here are accomplished, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in you, and that nothing will be able to separate us from your great love in Christ Jesus our Lord."

At funerals, we proclaim this great hope that God has the last word. It's the same hope that Martha declares in our gospel reading, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Martha knew that her brother's death was not the end of the story – she believed that he would rise again on the last day. But then Jesus confronts her that her hope is not big enough. He tells her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live." Jesus wasn't satisfied to just leave Martha with some sort of vague hope that at some unspecified time known simply as the last day in the distant future, there is hope for new life. Jesus called her to hope for new life then and there.

I wonder if we too are often like Martha, proclaiming the hope of the resurrection only at times when we are directly confronted with death – at a funeral or the loss of a loved one. Or if we only proclaim this hope once a year on Easter Sunday. By sticking these two passages before Easter and during Lent, the lectionary is inviting us to live into the hope of resurrection at all times. In other words, Jesus is asking Martha and Mary – and by extension us – to live our lives by the reality of resurrection so that this hope is not only for when we are directly confronted with death, not only when the Hallelujah chorus rings forth on Easter morning, but rather this hope is also a part of the daily realities of life.

What does this mean, then, to live as people of the resurrection all the time? We must first ask the obvious question – did these stories really happen? There's two ways of answering that question – the first on a more literal level. Did God really raise up a valley of dry bones? Did Jesus literally raise Lazarus from the dead? I confess that I don't know the answer to these questions. There is no proof that biblical scholars can give us that tell us either way. But what I can tell you is that for both Ezekiel and John, both of these stories were meant to make a larger, more metaphysical point. By telling us the stories of resurrecting the bones and of raising Lazarus from the dead, both writers are inviting us into the reality that God has overcome death not only at some distant point in the future but right now.

In the great Easter hymn, *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*, Charles Wesley declares,
Lives again our glorious King,
Where, O death, is now thy sting?
Once he died our souls to save,
Where's thy victory, boasting grave?

Precisely because Jesus is the resurrection, we proclaim death has lost all its power – not only for eternity, but for right now.

But that's not an easy statement to make. All you have to do is to look at the world around us to know what a bold statement that is. For it seems that death is as powerful as it ever has been. We all know what it is to lose a loved one or to fear losing a loved one. We turn on the news and hear about the most tragic of deaths – car accidents and murders. We look at the world and are confronted by refugee children washing up on beaches, the victims of war, and of people who are starving. To do as Jesus asks Martha, to believe that he is the resurrection and the life who has forever robbed death of its power, is not an easy thing to do – it requires tremendous faith.

These two passages in John and Ezekiel, taken together, allow us to confront death in multiple ways – we can all relate to the loss of a close friend or relative – like Martha and Mary and even Jesus' grief over losing Lazarus. Likewise, our world is filled with valleys of dry bones. Several years ago, I visited the Holocaust museum in DC and there's one room in the museum where you walk across a bridge and underneath the bridge is nothing but shoes. These are the actual shoes of Jews who were killed in a Nazi death camp. When the allied forces entered in, they found the shoes of all those who had been killed – it was thousands and thousands of shoes in that one room. That's the closest I've ever been to walking through a valley of dry bones. And it's in the face of evils such as this, that God continues to speak to us, "Can these bones live?" Will this evil have the last word? Is there hope left after the despair of war, after the horror of genocide, after the slaughter of men, women, and children in conflict after conflict throughout the world?

Ezekiel responds to this question asked of him by God, "Lord, you know."

What an amazing answer.

Ezekiel did not know.

He didn't know if there was hope for the bones. So he turned the question back to God – "I don't know God, can they live?" Likewise, Mary confronts Jesus just as Martha had done – "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Neither Ezekiel, nor Mary, nor Martha are certain of the possibility of the resurrection until they actually experience it. And yet resurrection happened! The bones lived again. Lazarus came out of the tomb.

Friends, the great hope of the resurrection, the great hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that resurrection does not depend on us – it doesn't depend on our actions and it doesn't depend on what we believe. This hope is our hope even if we are like Martha and think it only pertains to some distant eternal resurrection. This hope is our hope even if we are like Ezekiel and just don't know if hope is even possible in a world filled with so much death. This hope is our hope whether we have great faith or not sure if we have any faith at all. This hope is our hope if we can boldly declare like Charles Wesley that death has lost its sting and it's still our hope if we need to cry out like Mary, "Jesus if you had been here, this would not have happened."

So often, we tend to equate faith with certainty. And yet, if we're honest, my guess is that most of us here find moments of certainty few and far between. And yet, you're still here...coming to worship God, coming to hear and participate in the story of Jesus' overcoming death, daring to trust in the hope of the gospel even in the midst of doubt. Friends, that is exactly what faith is. You don't have to be able to explain the resurrection of Lazarus, or the dry bones, or even Jesus himself. You just have to keep showing up, you just have to keep clinging to the hope that somehow there is truth in this story, that somehow Jesus is the resurrection and the life, that somehow this story means there is hope no matter how powerful death may seem.

To live as people of the resurrection means that our funeral prayer becomes our daily prayer, "Speak to us once more your solemn message of life and death. Help us to live as those who are prepared to die. And when our days here are accomplished, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in you, and that nothing will be able to separate us from your great love in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Amen.