

Ezekiel 37:1-4

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3 He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." 4 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.

John 11:25-27

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

CAN THESE BONES LIVE?

Christians are called to believe in the possibility of life in the midst of a death-dealing world. Christians are asked to believe in the possibility of hope in the midst of despair. God asked the prophet, Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" And Jesus asked Martha, "Do you believe that I am the resurrection and the life?"

Those questions were not asked when things were going well. Those questions were asked when the worst had happened.

When God asked Ezekiel if the dry bones in the desert could live, that was a good question. It was an accurate way of describing what was going on with God's people in those days.

Many had been taken into exile after the Babylonian captivity. But, most of God's people had been killed in battle. They lay dead in the desert heat.

The children of Israel, the hope for the future was now nothing more than a pile of dry bones that lay silently in the valley. How can a country go on living when they have experienced such terrible defeat?

In the face of such a devastating scene Ezekiel didn't know what to say. He responded to God's question by saying, "God, you know."

In the valley of the dry bones, we too are rendered speechless.

CIVIL WAR DEAD

This past week PBS has been rebroadcasting Ken Burns' series on the Civil War. The Civil War was a turning point in the history of warfare. Rifles could shoot farther and straighter. Cannon fire was more deadly.

And this meant that military strategy needed to change. No longer could armies hope to storm fortified positions.

But, the generals of the Civil War were slow to learn this lesson. And so the battlefields at Fredericksburg and Antietam were literally filled with the corpses of those who ran headlong into enemy fire.

To make matters worse, the generals had not yet figured out a way to retrieve the dead and the dying. So, at night when the battle was over there was veritable sea of casualties between the two armies with some still writhing in pain and crying out for help.

It's been 150 years since the Civil War began, but the photographs and descriptions of those days still haunt the conscience of the American people. Abraham Lincoln at the time of his second inauguration said that he was a "tired man." In fact he thought of himself as the "tireddest man on earth."

Those old photographs of Lincoln tell the story. When you spend time in the valley of the dry bones, hope is hard to find. There are no winners in that valley. There is only profound sadness and silence.

THE TEST OF FAITH

And yet the Spirit brought the prophet to that place of despair. Why?

Perhaps the message of salvation can only be heard in that place where we face the depth of our need. Perhaps we only know what we believe when we enter the valley of the dried bones or stand before the tomb of a friend or loved one.

Such was the case for Martha. Her brother, Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. The decay of death would soon reduce him to dry bones. But, Jesus comes into this scene filled with despair and proclaims a miraculous word, an unbelievable word. He said to the grieving sister,

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

This is a verse that is familiar to all of us. I read it at every funeral I conduct.

Sometimes those words bring hope to those who hear them. And sometimes people are so overwhelmed by their grief that nothing helps.

When you stand in the valley of dry bones, when you stand in the presence of what Paul called in his first letter to Corinthians the final enemy, it is a moment that tests your faith.

When Jesus told Martha that he was the resurrection and the life, he also asked her a question, “Do you believe this?”

Belief is not just a set of doctrines to which we give our consent. Belief is trust. Belief is standing on the promises of God. Belief is having the faith to preach good news to that dead and dying congregation in the valley. Belief is trusting in the power of God when it looks like all is lost.

The people in our lessons for today had a hard time believing and preaching in such circumstances. The prophet was speechless in the valley.

Martha said to Jesus, “Yes, I believe you are the Messiah. I believe that some day the dead will rise. But, right now ... not so much. Right now hope is in short supply.”

The same was true for Mary. When Mary met Jesus she said, “Lord, if you had been here, maybe things would have been different. You could have healed my brother. Where there’s life there’s hope. But, now I don’t have much hope.”

And with that she began to cry.

GOOD GRIEF

Now crying is good for us. Tears can heal. Tears can let the sorrow on the inside come to the surface. Grief can be good.

But, if we believe that hope is limited to the living, grief can take a sinister turn. The apostle Paul talked about it in his first letter to the church at Thessalonica. He told those Christians that they should not grieve as people who have no hope. (1Thessalonians 4:13)

Certainly we grieve when we lose someone we love. And we should. But, Christians believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. We have hope for more than this life. We have hope for the life to come.

And that resurrection faith changes the way we live today. Tears do not have the final word.

4

Every decision does not have to be made out of the fear that our life or the lives of those we love will be lost. Instead, of living life looking back with regret; we look forward to that time when we see the kingdom come and God's will done.

Ezekiel learned the lesson of the dry bones. The dry bones became living beings. That seems like sheer fantasy to us. It seems impossible.

But, remember that what is impossible with men and women is possible with God. The Creator who had made those dry bones living beings in the first place has the ability to restore them to life.

God did that before the prophet's eyes.

And God told Ezekiel that one-day the nation of Israel would be restored. Their dry bones would be given new life, and they would return to the Promised Land.

In the same way Jesus cried with Martha and Mary and those who loved his friend Lazarus. But, the tears did not have the final say.

UNBINDING THE DEAD

Jesus went where no one wanted to go. He went to the tomb. He opened up the tomb that had been closed for four days and he spoke a word of unthinkable hope. He shouted in a voice so loud that it could wake the dead,

“Lazarus, come out.”

And he did come out ... still wearing his grave clothes, wrapped from head to foot like a mummy. Jesus commanded them to unbind him and let him go.

Notice this. God in Christ raised the dead, but the mourners are also given a job. Even the resurrected man needs a little more help.

Even the resurrected man needs to be unbound so that he can be truly free. I wonder. Might God be calling us to unbind the dead in some way? Could this story be teaching us a lesson not only about Lazarus but also about those that we have given up for dead?

I have never seen a resurrection, but I have seen people who were as good as dead come back to life. I have seen people the addicted come back from the brink of self-destruction. I have seen those who despised faith come to faith. I have seen little resurrections that point to a greater day.

But, sometimes we don't do our part. We don't unbind the resurrected one. We don't let the one who is healed let go of the old patterns and habits.

Remember that's what happened in our lesson last week. The people and religious leaders thought that the man who was blind from birth was steeped in sin. And even when the once-blind man could see they could accept it.

One commentator asked,

“How many mourners have you met who rather enjoy the task of mourning at their loved ones' tombs, rather than the task of unbinding them and setting them free? The grace of God is a gift that we can never replicate. But, we can sure mess it up. Human beings can certainly hold one another back in the walk toward new life.”

By the grace of God this didn't happen. The mourners did what they were told to do. They were able to unbind the dead man.

A SIGN OF GRACE AND JUDGMENT

Like so many of the miracles this miracle is a sign of a greater salvation. It is not just about the salvation of one man. It is about a new age of salvation, a public announcement that the old rules no longer apply.

Many did welcome this coming of a new age. They wanted to unbind the dead. They wanted to offer hope in the valley of the dry bones.

And so the crowds that follow Jesus swell. There is great rejoicing wherever he goes.

But, as it happened last week in our story about the man born blind, not everyone rejoices at the miracle. The political and religious leaders see danger ahead. If the crowds keep growing, Rome will notice. They will not hesitate to kill a potential Messiah, and it could even mean the downfall of the country.

And so the religious leaders go from being theological adversaries to being intent on destroying Jesus. They reason, “It is better for one man to die than for a whole country to suffer.”

Things will get worse from the perspective of the religious leaders. Many will join with Jesus because of this miraculous sign. They come not only to see Jesus but also to see the one who was raised from the dead. And the religious authorities decide that they need to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus in order to quell this movement.

It's ironic. Jesus raises Lazarus and the authorities plot to kill him again. The authorities will continue to have trouble with people who don't stay dead in the days to come. But, the power of God to save will prove to be stronger than the power of men and women to kill. The death dealing powers will be dealt a deathblow on the cross.

THE POLITICS OF RESURRECTION

In a way the religious leaders of Jesus' day were right. Resurrection does have political consequences. Take away the fear of death, and people are not so easy to control. Jesus might have known that his kingdom was not of this world, but the people who followed him didn't know.

Remember when Jesus miraculously fed a crowd of over 5,000 with only five loaves and two fish?

In John's gospel the crowd responded by trying to make Jesus king against his will. What do you think might happen now that Jesus has raised the dead? They wouldn't take no for an answer. This miracle man would soon become a political force, and that would be dangerous.

And the Romans were not known for their patience. They would deal harshly with a rebellious nation like Israel. The hills would be filled with crosses. One more failed Messiah might bring down the whole country.

A man who speaks loud enough to wake the dead is also disturbing the peace. He is dangerous. He must be silenced. And so the Scripture tells us that from that day on they planned to put him to death.

Do you think the leaders of our country would hesitate to sacrifice the life of one person if they thought the fate of our nation was at stake? They wouldn't hesitate for a minute. But, trampling on the rights of the individual because of fear is never a good idea.

In this case we know that the man they feared was in fact not a danger to their country but a savior, a savior not only for their country but a savior for the world.

If God in Christ can raise the dead, then every stone can be rolled away. When even dry bones can come together and form a mighty army, there is no obstacle that can stand in the way of God's kingdom.

JESUS CAN RAISE YOU FROM THE DEAD

But, do we really believe that? Do we really believe that the dry bones can live? Do we really believe that death, the final enemy has been decisively defeated? Do we really believe that the power of God in Christ can reach down and change us? Do we really believe that with God nothing is impossible?

That's the real question posed by today's lesson. And it's the question that each of us must answer.

This past week the Episcopal minister in St. Cloud put up the title of his sermon on the sign along the highway. It is based on this passage, John 11. And the title of the sermon was “Jesus Can Raise You From the Dead.”

I like that. If I wasn’t preaching this week, I might go hear that sermon! The title suggests that resurrection is not just about what happened then and there. Resurrection is about what happens here and now.

I think that most of us are like Martha. We put all of our hopes about the resurrection into the future. We say, “Yes, I believe in the resurrection of the dead. I believe that when that final trumpet sounds the dead in Christ will be raised first.”

But, does the doctrine of the resurrection have anything to say about how we live here and now? I believe it does.

Jesus didn’t say, “I will be the resurrection and the life.” Jesus said, “*I am* the resurrection and the life.” The one who believes in him here and now is changed here and now. Eternal life begins now. Eternal hope begins now. That’s as true today as it was long ago.

A SIGN OF THINGS TO COME

It’s important to note that in the gospel of John this resurrection is seen as a sign. It is a pointer toward a greater reality. The raising of Lazarus foreshadows an even greater resurrection.

As Jesus rolls the stone away this day, the stone will be rolled away from the place where they will lay the crucified Jesus. As Lazarus rose from the dead to die again another day, Jesus rose from the dead to die no more.

The signs in John’s gospel grow in scope and power. Jesus turns water into wine. He then feeds five thousand with only five loaves and two small fish. He heals a man who was blind from birth. And now he raises the dead.

As the signs increase in power, the cross looms ever closer. Lent, the season of contemplation and repentance is almost over, and there are hints in our Scripture lesson of the events to come.

Do we believe in this sign of things to come? Do we believe in the possibility of resurrection? Do we believe that hope does not end even with death, that in Jesus we have hope for life eternal?

8

Do we believe that in life and in death we belong to God? Do we believe that the creator of heaven and earth can recreate us in a new and wonderful way in that kingdom that comes?

Resurrection is a hard miracle to believe. We would like to believe, but it is hard for us to get beyond our fears. It is hard for us to stand in front of the tomb and believe that there is hope for life beyond this life.

But, if we believe that, if we believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life and that those who believe in him will never die, then a lot of the things that hold us back in this life will lose their power over us.

We too will claim for ourselves the promise of life eternal.

Amen.