

WPC
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Breathing Life Into Death
Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45

In their contrasts between life and death, both of our texts for today anticipate Easter.

Ezekiel 37 announces the revival of the nation of Israel from the time in Exile. This news of new life being restored to the people and nation of Israel must have been highly significant to the Israelite exiles in Babylon (this passage was also very significant to black slaves torn from their proud African cultures, as the black spiritual "Dem Bones" indicates - you remember the song? "Foot bone connected to your ankle bone. Ankle bone connected to your leg bone. Leg bone connected to your knee bone. Knee bone connected to your thigh bone. Thigh bone connected to your hip bone. Hip bone connected to your Back bone. Back bone connected to your shoulder bone. Shoulder bone connected to your Neck bone. Neck bone connected to your Head bone").

The exiles themselves have no more hope of resuscitating the kingdom of Israel than of putting flesh on a skeleton and calling it to life. But what humans can't possibly do, God has the power to accomplish. Ezekiel sees the bones come back to life through the breath of God. This

vision, which refers to Israel being re-established, indirectly anticipates the resurrection of the body.

Ezekiel's vision is given for a people who have lost heart, who are suffering a death of the spirit because they're in exile in a foreign land. Their temple has been destroyed, their city plundered, their leaders put in chains, their soldiers killed, and their young men and women either killed or dragged off into a foreign land. Ezekiel sees that the soul of his people has withered and died, becoming as lifeless as a valley of dry bones. Can these bones live? That's what God asks.

This morning's Gospel passage narrates for us Jesus' most astounding miracle: raising Lazarus from the dead. According to John, the reason for the large crowds on Palm Sunday is because this particular miracle spreads Jesus' fame throughout the region. This incident also triggers the wrath of the religious leaders so that they begin plotting Jesus' death.

I want to make a couple of reflections on this passage. First, I'd like to reflect on what Jesus does at the beginning of this story. When Jesus receives word that his friend Lazarus is ill, he seems curiously unmoved. It's intriguing that Jesus is intentionally tardy: "Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he *stayed two days longer* in the place where he was." (v. 5-6)

Does that verse strike you as odd? It's an incongruous statement. Jesus loves this family, yet he intentionally delays going to them. He waits two whole days after hearing the news to go to Bethany. By that time, of course, it's too late. Lazarus is dead.

This point is not lost on either Mary or Martha. "Lord, if you had been here," they both say, "my brother would not have died." (John 11:21,32). Why in heaven's name was Jesus late?

Methodist Bishop William Willimon notes: "In the face of death, Jesus proclaims not 'I've come to resurrect someone' but rather, 'I am the resurrection and the life.' Jesus refuses to be jerked around by death, by sickness, by those matters that so totally consume us. He does not drop what he is doing and rush right over to Bethany, just on the basis of a little thing like a mortal illness. Maybe this is because Jesus wisely knows that all of us are suffering from a mortal illness. [After all, no one gets out of this life alive]. We are human, and all human beings must die. But there is a way to do it. We can walk with Jesus the way of the cross. We can engage ourselves in those ministries that Jesus gives us in the time that we have."¹

Tom Long says that "Jesus' mission transcends our tiny definitions of urgency. A man is dying. More than that, it was Jesus' friend Lazarus who

¹ William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, April 10, 2011, p. 11.

was dying. Lazarus' body grew weak, hot with fever. Mary and Martha were wringing their hands with worry. The whole village of Bethany was troubled. Naturally, from Bethany's perspective, this was the most urgent, important, life or death crisis in all of creation, and Jesus should have dropped everything in the world to be there. But Jesus will not drop the world; he will save it, all of it. Jesus is not controlled by illness and death, even his dear friend Lazarus' illness and death; to the contrary, Jesus is the one in control. Jesus does not jump when illness and death say 'jump,' he conquers illness and death for the entire human race." (Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*, 58)

My second reflection has to do with Lazarus himself. We don't know what death was like for Lazarus, but we can imagine that after four days of being dead, he was getting pretty used to it. After four days of being dead, I'm sure he couldn't believe his ears when he heard Jesus call out to him, 'Lazarus, come out!' All of a sudden, Lazarus received a tremendous and unusual gift: a second chance at life. Lazarus got a do-over; he got to rewind the tape, to start again with a blank slate. Lazarus got a second chance.

That offer of a second chance is offered to us as well. Christianity affirms that God offers the promise of forgiveness, the assurance of second

chances. The question is, what are we going to do with our Second Chance? It's an incredible opportunity, but it can also be a bit scary. When Lazarus came back to life, he not only had to deal with life's daily responsibilities again, but soon thereafter his life was threatened by the chief priests. Laying hold of God's promises is free, but with it comes responsibility and risk.

But I imagine the experience of coming back to life was more powerful than the experience of death was for Lazarus. I like the way a former seminary professor of mine, Steven Kraftchick, put it: "The pain of Lazarus' death is not gone, but its threat is removed. The reality of physical death is not ignored, it cannot be, but its ultimacy is overturned. The absence we feel is genuine, as real as time will allow, and let no one tell you otherwise; but if God is not felt, do not think that God is unaware. This felt absence is not abandonment, but an occasion for the expression of love." (Kraftchick, PTS Bulletin, 1993).

Next to the dramatic vision of the restoration to life of the people of Israel in the Ezekiel 37 account and the resurrection of Jesus in the Four Gospels, this John 11 story is the most spectacular restoration to life story in our biblical texts. The Gospel asserts that God has given to Jesus power to restore to life even people who have been in the tomb longer than Jesus himself was, and whose bodies have already undergone considerable decay.

Lazarus was in the tomb not three days as Jesus had been, but four (John 11:17, 39), and unlike the accounts of Jesus' resurrection we're shown in this story the dead man actually walking out of the tomb. Decaying, foul-smelling flesh has become healthy and beautifully restored flesh.

Fred Craddock notes: "Lazarus left the tomb, but the price was that Jesus had to enter it (v. 44-53). When Jesus asked where Lazarus had been laid, they said to him, 'Come and see.' This expression 'come and see' is in John's Gospel an invitation to discipleship (1:39, 46; 4:29). Here the word is turned upon Jesus himself. The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Perhaps this realization interprets the next verse: "Jesus began to weep."²

We are only two weeks away from Easter. As we prepare to enter Holy Week, many questions float in the air – Can the bones of a crucified man live? Do you believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth? Do you believe in Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord, who died and rose for us that we might have abundant life? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, God's breath that brings new life wherever it blows? "Mortal, can these bones live?" Yes, Lord, most definitely yes. Thanks be to God.

² Fred Craddock, *Preaching Through the Christian Year A*, p. 178.