

Exodus 14:10–31; 15:20–21

Ezekiel 37:1–14

Romans 6:3–11

MATTHEW 28:1–10

“Love and Life will conquer strife”

“Death and sin will always win.”

So people thought.

Sounds like a chant you might hear in a stadium or an arena: “Death and sin will always win! Death and sin will always win!” – except that it would have been chanted by the ancient Egyptian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, and the Roman Empire and its accomplices to the believers in the LORD at the three bleakest times in the history of the People of God, which are the settings of our Old Testament and Gospel readings this evening.

Most depressing, like the chants of vicious fans at your team’s toughest road game, this belief had gotten into the heads and hearts of most of the believers in the LORD themselves. And perhaps, at our lowest moments, we may be tempted to bitterly embrace this belief as well.

That’s certainly where nearly all of the Israelites were when tonight’s passage from the Book of Exodus opens. The Israelites had endured bitter, oppressive slavery in Egypt in the 13th century B.C., survived Pharaoh’s efforts at genocide, survived the increased burdens put on them by Pharaoh when Moses began to tell him, “Let my people go,” survived the plagues with which the LORD had devastated Egypt, and now were standing on the shores of the Red Sea with the Egyptian army bearing down on them.

No wonder they despaired. Without God, they had as much chance against Egyptian armored chariots as we would have against a regiment of tanks if we were equipped with wiffle bats.

So the Israelites became perhaps the first people in history to become *nostalgic for slavery*. They cried out to Moses –and to God – “was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”

Can you hear the chant of the Egyptian army as it comes frighteningly near?

“Death and sin will always win! Death and sin will always win!”

But Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid.”

(That is the most frequently uttered command in the Bible – did you know that?)

“Do not be afraid.” We’ll hear it again tonight.)

“Stand firm,” Moses said, “and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today.”

There are about three different versions of exactly how the Israelites were delivered, all of which are included in Exodus. Which version we believe doesn’t greatly matter. What matters is for us to recognize the reality that in their darkest hour, the Israelites were delivered

from slavery in the mightiest empire in the world into freedom, and delivered not because of their own strength, smarts or good looks, but by the grace and power of God. *There is no other explanation.* God intervenes in history to liberate nations and peoples, starting with the people of Israel, even when most of them didn't believe it was possible.

All those taunting chants from the Egyptian charioteers, the Panzer divisions of the 13th Century B.C., *died.* The chants of "death" were what died, along with those who chanted them. *Now hear this: "Love and Life will conquer strife. Love and Life will conquer strife."*

Ezekiel was called by God to be a prophet to the people of Israel in exile in Babylon in the 6th Century B.C. The two Israelite nations in the Holy Land had been conquered and seemingly destroyed by aggressive Middle Eastern empires, the northern nation of Israel by the Assyrian Empire in 727 B.C. and the southern nation of Judah by the Babylonia Empire in 586 B.C.

Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, had suffered a horrendous siege, with starvation and terrible suffering, and then was burned by its conquerors and all its people above the rank of peasant were taken off into exile in Babylon – modern-day Iraq.

Most of the exiles felt hopeless – understandably so! "By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept," one of them wrote in what is now known as Psalm 137. They were hundreds of miles away from their homeland, which was under foreign, pagan rule. They believed, also understandably, that they had been punished by God for their thoroughly documented unfaithfulness to God. It looked to them like God had ripped up the covenant he had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, had given up on the people God had delivered from slavery in Egypt and blessed with the Ten Commandments and with a succession of devout, skilled leaders – kings like David, Hezekiah and Josiah and prophets like Isaiah, Amos and Jeremiah.

They said, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." The taunts of their captors had soaked into their souls: "Death and sin will always win! Death and sin will always win!"

But there was still a prophet among them to whom the Word of the LORD came.

God gave Ezekiel a vision of a valley of dry bones, looking as dead as the people of Israel thought their future was.

"Mortal, can these bones live?" God asked Ezekiel. "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, [sing] hear the Word of the LORD. Thus says the LORD God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live."

Indeed they did – in Ezekiel's vision, and then in reality. Forty-seven years after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the mighty Babylonian Empire collapsed after losing just one battle to the invading Persians (from modern-day Iran), just as another prophet, the one who wrote Chapters 40–55 in the Book of Isaiah, predicted. The Persian Emperor, Cyrus, proclaimed that the Israelites were now free and could go home and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple to their God.

[Chanting] "Love and Life will conquer strife." Join with me! "Love and Life will conquer strife. Love and Life will conquer strife."

Those who led the other, taunting, vicious chant? Something about death and sin?

They lost. They died. They're *gone*. Like those from the other empires, you can find the Babylonians only in long-silent statues in museums. The Jews live.

"After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb."

The others? The men? They were hiding, terrified of the Roman army just as their ancestors – *our* spiritual ancestors too – had been terrified of the Babylonian army, and of the Egyptian army before that. And with good reason. Our spiritual ancestors were not "wimps." They were intelligent people who calculated their odds against the most powerful empires of their centuries and recognized that their chances, alone, were exactly zero. Reasonable judgment. Vegas wouldn't even take odds on them.

But in each of these instances, in the absolute depths of despair, it only took a handful of people of great faith and courage to make a difference. One such person was our spiritual ancestor Moses. Another such person was our spiritual ancestor Ezekiel. And two other such people were our spiritual ancestors Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary," whichever Mary that was. They were women of great courage, publicly identifying themselves once again with a man who had just been executed on charges of being an Enemy of the State by the mightiest empire on earth. An empire, that, as the men also knew, always seemed to have some extra crosses lying around to execute more people if it felt like it.

And now those two women were going to visit Jesus' tomb, unescorted and unprotected by any men, who were still hiding. And they were going to a tomb which, according to Matthew, was guarded by a detachment of Roman soldiers. What treatment might two unescorted women coming to a lonely place at dawn risk receiving at the hands of well-armed, muscular, bored soldiers of the army that had conquered their country? What risks were the two Marys taking? Think about it.

"And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the LORD, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men."

The *soldiers* who had killed the lord of Life became terrified and "became like dead men." "Death and sin will ... die." *And so will those who champion them.*

"Do not be afraid," the angel said to the women. Ever hear that before? News so good and so unexpected was bound to be scary. "Love and Life will conquer strife." Say it with me: "Love and Life will conquer strife. Love and Life will conquer strife. Love and Life will conquer strife!"

So it was on the shores of the Red Sea, in the valley of the dry bones, and at the tomb just outside Jerusalem very early that Sunday morning when two brave, faithful women were the first to learn that Death is dying, and Sin is beginning to lose its grip on the world, thanks to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We can participate in that victory. God who gives freedom to slaves, homes to the exiled, and life to the dead can also raise us up *here and now* to empowered, Spirit-filled lives of love and hope, serenity and service: Love and Life will conquer strife.

And the victory God offers us is not just for this life, *but for ever*: "Life and Love now reign above. Life and Love now reign above. Life and Love now reign above."

But God's terms are this: *we have to give up trying to save ourselves and give up our hopelessness when that doesn't work.* That is what is behind the Baptismal vows and the Baptismal Covenant which will be said tonight at this, the first service of Easter this year. We *need* to be saved from sin, we *can* be raised to new life here and now and in the life to come, but *we cannot do it ourselves.* We need a Savior; and thank God, we have one, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Sometimes, individuals or families as well as nations may feel like they are standing at the edge of the Red Sea, or in a valley of dry bones, when circumstances are very, very challenging. This often happens, because this beautiful, God-made, fallen world is broken, and is awaiting its healing by God.

So let us thank God for signs we can recognize of the coming healing of the world and the final and complete victory of Life and Love. Signs like a child who was born very, very premature – 1 lb. 12 oz. last October – who, thanks to parental love, excellent medical care, and the grace of God, now celebrates his first Easter and his baptismal day as a hearty 9 lb., 8 oz. boy.

And how appropriate it is that his middle name – Chukwuebuka – means “God is awesome.” [I sing “Our God is an awesome God.”] And his first name, Obiajulu, means “My heart has found peace.”

If we remember how awesome God is, our hearts can find peace. “Love and Life will conquer strife! Love and Life will conquer strife!” And “Life and Love now reign above. Life and Love now reign above.” And they will reign here, when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

The Rev. Francis A. Hubbard
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
Monmouth Junction, New Jersey