

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 130
Romans 8; 6-11
John 11:1-45

Unbind him and let him go

There is much in these scriptures about life and death and they are very graphic – at first read, through the lens of popular culture either of these stories, the dry bones, or Lazarus would be a contender for a zombie movie. It is also no accident that they both occur here in this final week of Lent, as we prepare to take the final journey to the city gates of Jerusalem.

Ezekiel, who was exiled into captivity in Babylon around the year 570, is faced with the prophetic vision of a valley filled with dead, dried bones. Symbolic, we are told of a people who are losing their faith, losing their hope, just as they have lost their homeland. Not only did they fear never returning to their land, but they were also filled with the shame of having lost the land; a people far from home and the life and culture they knew; prisoners in a foreign place. No wonder their resolve was faltering. Ezekiel is told to order these bones to live, to resurrect the hope of the people “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord; I will put sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin and put breath in you...” This is the power of God to renew and restore; to create and re-create, lifting up from the gravesite these dead bones, enfleshing them with muscle and sinew – the stuff of life and creation. But that done, they are still not living; it will need the breath of God, the same breath that breathed life across the surface of the earth in the beginning and into the nostrils of man, taken from the four winds to bring full life and transformative new life to these dead bones. “I will put my spirit in you and you will live.”

So too in the gospel where we witness the last sign before Jesus goes to Jerusalem. Just as with the earlier signs in the gospel that we’ve witnessed during Lent, we have a sign, a dialogue and then Jesus’ interpretation. Only here, things are reversed, we have a dialogue first, then interpretation and then the sign. Just as before, we have the purpose of the sign to glorify God...we have clear links to the creative power of God to resurrect and revive, that also parallel the story of the dead bones, plus we have significant foreshadowing of Jesus’ own death – being trouble, weeping, a tomb, a stone, wrappings; all is laden with expectancy.

And just as before, we have the human story, of Jesus’ dearest friends, his adopted family, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. In the human story we have a myriad of questions – why did he not go to Lazarus sooner? “So that the Son of god may be glorified” Why did he let him die? “I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.” Why did Jesus weep, if he knew what was going to happen? That answer is elusive, but

perhaps it lies in the invitation to “Come and see”. Throughout this gospel, Jesus’s signs have caused people to “come and see” to see this great man who does these things and believe in him. Today it is his beloved friends, who are disappointed, heart-broken, grieving, angry, and desperate who invite him to come and see. Come and see what? What will Jesus see when he comes to that tomb? This is the beginning of the endgame, and perhaps Jesus weeps because he knows that on many levels his mortal mission has failed. This world he came to save has not been released from the bondage of death by sin; it will be his expiatory action to release us, just as he declares to the bindings of Lazarus, unbind him, and let him go. The glorification of Christ lies in the precursor of his death, entombment and subsequent resurrection, when all that will remain will be those empty wrappings.

This fifth week of Lent finds us in this tomb. Somewhere in us all are the darkest places where we dare not go; somewhere in those dark recesses are the things that hold us hostage and bind us up and keep us dead to our full life in Christ. This is hard work, and not work that will be complete in April 2011. This is work which if we do it right, takes a lifetime. The invitation is there today to go into the darkness, afraid as we are. I wonder if you, like me, have become estranged from family members somehow. And I’ve yet to find a family that doesn’t have some estrangement. I wonder if you, like me, have done and said things that are so shameful that you can’t even name them to yourself, let alone anyone else; I wonder if you, like me have hurt someone so deeply that you had to run away, or if you, like me, have been hurt but can’t forgive, staying frozen in that moment of righteous indignation. These things bind us up. They hold us in a place where we are in a kind of death, where we are dead to the joy and peace of God in our lives.

Paul unlocks the mystery. This is about our life now – the life that we enjoy here on earth, rather than what is yet to come. Paul tells us it is the spirit that lives in us and transforms us to new life – not just for the time of resurrection, but also in the here and now, “to set our mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the spirit is life and peace.” In John, too, Jesus came to transform life as we know it in our mortal selves, to show us the way to live into our lives, to invite us to live fully.

Jesus calls us personally this morning to come out – just as he calls Lazarus. Jesus calls us to come into the light, to be unbound of our bindings and the things that hold us hostage, and in His name to be released of them – “unbind him, and let him go” Jesus cries out. And when we do this work, we find that with Lazarus we can rise again, not as a zombie walking dead, but into a newly transformed life in the spirit as we walk forward with those bindings falling to the ground around us. +

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