

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza

April 2, 2017

Fifth Sunday in Lent; Ezekiel 37:1-14 and John 11:1-45

*Almighty God, we ask that you grant us in this world knowledge of your truth,
and in the next, life everlasting*

One of my very favorite times of the year is early spring – that very cusp of springtime when we witness nature’s surprising transition from the death of winter into the promised new life of spring. The trees which, for all that one can see, have been dead for months – no leaves, no color, no apparent life at all – suddenly begin to transform. At first it is subtle, mere suggestions of buds appearing gently and slowly at the ends of the branches. Suddenly, they bloom with beautiful and sweet-smelling flowers. Then, and this is the moment I love most, the delicate flowers begin to wither and drop off, only to find fresh and tender new leaves beginning to unfurl.

My favorite color in nature is that glorious and delicate yellow-green of new spring leaves. All of nature seems bright, fresh, and vibrant with this color, but it is a fragile shade of green, isn’t it? All too soon, that youthful yellow-green will mature into a heartier and darker green of summer. The hopefulness I feel in the springtime yellow-green of new leaves and new life buoys my spirit and makes my heart sing. It is as if Springtime herself has imparted the breath of life into those dead, dry branches.

Is there any more powerful a promise than that of new life? That even this wasted body and these dry and lifeless bones may have their flesh and breath restored? Indeed, resurrection and, more specifically, the new life to be found within our lives in Christ, are the foundational tenants of our faith. It is this promise –above any and all others – that defines Christianity. Resurrection and life renewed, restored, and liberated from the clutches of death (whether spiritual, physical, emotional, mental, or societal death) are central to the meaning that we make of our lives, and our sense of Christian vocation.¹

Our scripture lessons today speak of God’s willingness and desire to liberate us from the bondage of death; call forth new life from the sad, dry bones that remain; and restore vitality to what has become lifeless. Our Old Testament lesson provides a powerful image of this. During the hopelessness of the period of the Exile, the Lord God gave the Prophet Ezekiel a vision of a valley of dry, lifeless bones and commanded him to prophesy to the bones so that they might live again and know that God is the Lord. This is a harrowing text that leaves one both spooked and filled with wonder.

Ezekiel is speaking to a scattered and destroyed community – one that has seen their people slaughtered by the Babylonians, their holy city and Temple reduced to rubble, and the remains of their community exiled to Babylon. While the valley of dry bones is metaphorical, the imagery captures and reflects the complete devastation, humiliation, and hopelessness of a thoroughly defeated people. It is to these people that the prophet Ezekiel speaks; a scattered and desolate people of Israel, far from home who wonder whether they will live again. In answer to this question, Ezekiel speaks what is God’s promise: “Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.” (37:5-6)

While a gory image, it is powerful. Even in the midst of the seemingly lifeless desert, the God of all life promises to restore wholeness, vitality, and hope to a desolate and dead community. Where

¹ Miles, Veronica; *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2* (p. 144).

things that had been dried out are now enlivened; things that had ceased to breathe now are given the breath of life; things that have wasted away are now made new. The bringing forth of new life... this is the mark of God and his work of salvation.

We have heard today's Gospel story so many times that we even give it a short-hand description: the "Raising of Lazarus." It has become so familiar that we sometimes lose the power of the story and what it signifies about the nature of God, ourselves, and the salvation to be experienced in communion with Jesus. In this lesson, we are again brought to the overarching question for this 5th Sunday in Lent: can there be life again in stale, barren places? In all the death and dryness that sometimes surrounds us, can hope live and breathe and be renewed through Jesus Christ?

The gospel accounts make it abundantly clear that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are dear and close friends, and the love they have for each other is evident in how intimately and freely they interact with each other. When Jesus arrives at Bethany upon hearing the news of Lazarus' death, both Martha and Mary speak with Jesus as only those who are intimate do: expressing their frustration and anger for his coming too late to heal their brother, all the more disappointed because they knew that he could have healed Lazarus. On Jesus' part, he received their grief and anger, even while weeping himself as he suffered the pain of his friend's death.

At the tomb where Lazarus has been laid, Jesus tells the crowd to roll away the stone covering the entrance to the tomb. He offers a prayer expressing his relationship to the Father so that those present would know that Jesus was sent by God. Jesus then calls out: "Lazarus, come out!" and the man who has been dead for four days comes out from within the darkness. In a sign of God's glory as manifested through his Son, death is overcome. While resurrected life is still to come, but renewed, restored, and enlivened life may be lived now.

John ends his account of this story with the statement that many who were there that day believed in Jesus because of what they had seen. For John, the only proper response to the life-giving acts of God in and through the person of Jesus is to believe in the true identity of Jesus and his power to bring life out of death. Over and again, the evangelist shows that the experience of Jesus is what brings us to believe in him by calling forth from within us a deep, abiding, and life-giving faith.

"I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus declares to Martha and to us all. I can think of no more powerful a statement of the full embodiment and life-giving presence of God than this – that God's promises of restoration and everlasting life are here and now, already being realized amid and despite the ordinariness of the course of life, which includes illnesses, death, and burials like those of Lazarus.²

God's love for us is personal – Jesus joins us in our pain, our turmoil, our neediness, and our fragile mortality. This life-giving love of God also calls us out of ourselves and our needs, to love and attend to the needs of others, our communities, and the world. Embodying God's love in the world, we participate in God's work of renewal, helping to bring forth new life from the dry and dead bones around us. Individually as disciples of Christ and corporately as the Church, we are called to be an embodiment of hope in stale or scary places, to hear the cries of our brothers and sisters, to breathe renewed life into the Body of Christ by living fully as Jesus did."³

Amen.

² Duke, James O.; *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2* (p. 144).

³ Foster-Fulton, Sally; *Starters for Sunday: Fifth Sunday in Lent, 2 April 2017*.