

## CAN THESE BONES LIVE?

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Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11

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Things get broken. Toys break, your favorite slippers wear out, your favorite mug cracks in the dishwasher.

Life gets broken, too. Relationships fail, dreams crumble. Marriages die, people betray one another, nations fight against nations, race against race. Nothing seems to last. Nothing is forever. Can these bones live?

Well, life is transitory. I think sometimes we expect too much of it. But the trust and hope we place in people, in our families, in our country, in our church, in our schools, in our government, in ourselves, all wither and die, all give way to disappointment—to gloom and death, if we let it. Life is, if you choose to see it that way, pretty much broken.

Take a minute. Remember when you first had this thought. Did it feel overpowering, at the time? Still? Imagine the people, the place. Then imagine the embrace of God around all of it.

What dreams, what visions, might have died in your life? How did that make you feel? Where did it lead you? Can these bones live?

These broken dreams, these wasted opportunities, these unkept promises, all weigh more on us as the end of our life draws nearer. They remind us of death—theirs, of course, but also of our own. For as we all know, death is the one part of life we can all count on not missing.

How humbling, isn't it? We are all equal before the great mystery of death. Some of our cells die every day, and new cells grow. But every time a dream dies, every time we rush past an opportunity that will never come again, no matter how small, we die a little, don't we? Death *is* part of life.

We pray for death, don't we, sometimes—partly because it's merciful for the sufferer, but partly because we're worn out caring for them. And sometimes, in a moment of despair, we might even, fleetingly, wish *we* were dead—not to hasten it, but rather that it had already happened, because then we wouldn't have troubles any more. Can these bones live?

How do you see your own death? How do you think God sees death? What *is* death? Is there such a thing as a “good” or a “bad” death?

Ezekiel is telling his story to a broken, despairing Israel. Nothing's been good about the deaths they've lived through.

The Babylonian soldiers have killed their children and old people before their eyes. They've desecrated the Temple, demolished it, and carted all the able-bodied Israelites off to slavery in Babylon.

“By the waters of Babylon,” the people lament, “there we sat down and there we wept, when we remembered Jerusalem...for there our captors asked us for songs: ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’” And then comes that part of that Psalm that horrifies us all; but here it is in context. The Israelites sing in their own language, so their words are not intelligible to their captors. “Happy shall they be,” they sing, “who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take *your* little ones and dash them against the rock!”

Harsh, and not what we think should be in the Word of God, but very human. Who among us can even imagine ourselves in their place? And yet, although we rarely see such things on TV news—it doesn't sell advertising—these things are still happening, all over the world, as we sit here in church today—in Africa, in Central America, in Asia, and still, all these centuries later, in the Middle East. And the strong and lucky ones are escaping, hoping to find a new homeland where their children can be safe and free.

Today's Gospel reading is the story of the death of Lazarus. It's another long, convoluted one, most of the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of John, so I decided to leave it for awhile into the sermon, and take out some of the distractions that only make sense if you're reading the whole Gospel all at once. Here it is:

*Now a certain man was ill: Lazarus of Bethany, the brother of Mary and her sister Martha. So the sisters sent to Jesus, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."*

*When Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. And when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, saying, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."*

*Then Mary came to where Jesus was, and fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the friends and relations who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept.*

*So the friends and relations said, "See how he loved him!" But some said, "He opened the eyes of the blind man: couldn't he also have kept this man from dying?"*

*Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"*

*So they took away the stone. And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." And the man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."*

*Many of the people, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done*

*So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."*

*But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, than that the whole nation should perish." So from that day on they made plans to put Jesus to death.*

Here, on the Fifth Sunday of Lent and, in John's narrative, just as he sets his face toward Jerusalem, Jesus confronts death. Lazarus, his dear friend—not a disciple, not a follower, but that rarer thing, a friend—is dead. Jesus grieves, and then, in the power of the Spirit, he raises Lazarus to life!

Think of the times you've wished you could do this, and the sadness you felt that you didn't have enough faith. Maybe you even compared yourself to Jesus and the early apostles in the Bible and found yourself sorely wanting. Why don't you have enough faith? Not even a mustard seed! Can these bones live?

Some of you have been churchgoers your whole lives. Some of you, after a lot of pain and seeking, have found your way back. Either way, it's distressing, isn't it, to read that "the institutional church is dying." And it is, if you look at the kinds of things institutions care about: statistics, money, not to mention status and influence. Less and less is the church a true player on the world stage. "Christendom" is a thing of the past. Can these bones live?

Well, I'm here to tell you that not only can these bones live, they *are* living, springing to life all over the place, more vividly than they have for many a year. Christendom *is* dead, but the Christian faith? The Christian faith is so alive—"Behold! God is doing a new thing! It springs forth—do you not perceive it?"

And the crucial difference? The Christian faith, the new worshipping communities that are bursting out of the old church like new wine bursting old wineskins, are *following Jesus*. They aren't worshipping Jesus; they're *following* him—or rather, they understand, with the Prophet Amos, and with Jesus himself, that the only way to worship God in Jesus Christ our Lord is *to do the things he says*. Justice flowing like waters, righteousness like an everflowing stream: "*out of a believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.*" [Amos 5:24; John 7:38]

What do we hear, in this strange story? What do we learn?

*Jesus is completely focused on God and the work of God.* To Jesus, even the death of a beloved friend is an opportunity for the glory of God to be revealed. It's shocking. But in John's Gospel, all the signs and wonders Jesus works are meant to reveal in him the great abundance and everflowing compassion of the one Jesus calls Abba, Daddy.

God must indeed see death differently—God grieves over the death of every blade of grass, and yet, God has made all living things with a need to consume something that was once alive. Death and decay are, truly, not only a part of life, but necessary to it.

How far, indeed, are God's ways above our ways! "Rivers of living water?" Remember our Baptism? That's just the beginning.

Jesus restores life to that which was dead, hope where it seemed hopeless, a vision for tomorrow, where grief and endless mourning had seemed, only hours before, to be all there was left. Lazarus returns from the dead. The Spirit, the Breath of Life, flowed through his whole person—dead, and yes, even decaying, though he had been.

But—Lazarus will die again.

This isn't the Resurrection of Jesus. Lazarus was *resuscitated*. He rose, yes, he walked again, rejoined his family and friends, lived, loved. Undoubtedly he would have told us it was a life-changing experience. But Lazarus remained the same man, even revived from the dead, and so, in due course, he died. So this isn't the same as the Resurrection, even if some of the details, as John tells the story, deliberately prefigure it.

In the Resurrection of Easter, to which we look forward in faith this Communion Sunday in Lent, Jesus *became* the glory of God. Forever transformed, his body was no longer a body of this earth. The Gospels all do their best to convey this Resurrection body, where heaven came to earth, and earth to heaven, but probably it was the Apostle Paul who did it best:

*I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat...*

[II Corinthians 12:2]

We are talking about a different, well, in human words, *category of experience*—although it's unclassifiable—than any empirical perception of the five senses. The Resurrection of Jesus breaks all the rules of the natural order. The Resurrection is God's YES to all Jesus did, all Jesus said, all Jesus was and is. It confirmed as *of God* Jesus' life and ministry, all of who and what he was as a human being. In the Resurrection, the corruptible—human frailty, even death itself—becomes incorruptible.

Can these bones live? O Lord, thou knowest.

Lazarus is raised from death as a promise of God's mercy, assurance of the power of God's love. But then, God gives a still greater promise, a still greater assurance, in the Resurrection of Jesus.

In the Resurrection, Life, completely new and utterly transformed, is offered to all of us: Life as we've never known it before.

We might well fear to step into the fullness of such a transformed life, if it weren't for the fact that God has shown us the Resurrection of Jesus, invited us into the Life of Jesus, a life so filled with the Spirit, so overflowing with the compassion of God, that he poured out that power for any and all, and was willing to go even to death to make right the world God loves. The Resurrection demonstrates in the most vivid way possible what it means to be fully human, what indeed *is* full human living in the image of God—nothing less than death to all but the love of God, and in that death, life everlasting.

And yes, the Risen Lord calls out to us, that new voice we think we've never heard, from beyond the Resurrection, "Come out!"

O People of God, trust the Spirit, trust Jesus, trust the love of God, come out of your tombs, and, O Lord, untie us and set us free!

AMEN.