

Ezekiel, Lazarus & Us

Ezekiel 37:1-14 John 11:1-45

Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church

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"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." These are words of faith. The sisters, Mary and Martha, even those standing around say it. If you had been here, Lazarus would not have died.

These people believe in the power of God. But they also hedge their bets a bit. Martha and Mary and the bystanders express surprise that Jesus can do anything for Lazarus now that Lazarus is in the tomb. They have no doubt that Jesus could have kept him out of the grave, but now that he is dead, please don't roll away the stone. It will smell bad. Rising in the resurrection of the dead on the last day is one thing. Bringing back Lazarus from the dead right now is another.

Christians did not invent the idea of the resurrection. Resurrection symbolism is found in the Old Testament, and belief in the resurrection was a much-debated issue in Jesus' day. People were waiting for God to establish a new order, and it was thought only just that those who had suffered and died in all the years of oppression should be rewarded with some kind of participation in God's glorious reign. Many in Israel believed that on that final day of triumph the righteous would rise up out of their graves. When Jesus is approaching Lazarus' grave, Martha expresses her faith in his ability to heal. When Jesus says, "your brother will rise again," Martha interprets his words in terms of current resurrection beliefs. "I know that he will rise to life on the last day." But Jesus is not talking about a "last day" resurrection. Jesus is offering life at this moment. Now is the time of resurrection in our lives. Even when the odor of death is all about us, God comes to give life. Jesus was not interested in teaching people a proper resurrection theology. Jesus came that we might experience Life.

It's not Easter Sunday, yet. Holy Week still looms before us. But each of our scripture lessons this morning proclaims God's power over death.

In the book of Ezekiel the prophet is shown a valley of death. The prophet follows God's instructions to prophesy to the dry bones and God gives them life again. This passage includes both Ezekiel's vision and the interpretation of that vision. The valley of dry bones, Ezekiel is told, is the community of Israel. Ezekiel resonates with this vision. He lives in this community. He knows these people of exile, victims of violence – people who have been ripped away from their families and their land. The vision also comes with instructions. It is your job, Ezekiel, to speak the word. God will complete the miracle by breathing life into a lifeless people.

We have seen the vision of the dry bones. We've been in that valley! We can picture Elijah standing today in the streets of Baghdad, or Gaza, in Jerusalem or at a bus stop in Los Angeles. He is standing where mothers are weeping for their children. We have seen the devastation, far off in large events and very close to home in our personal struggles and grief. We know what it feels like to be drained of energy. But that second part of the story, the part where the foot bone gets connected to the ankle bone, and the ankle bone gets connected to the leg bone ... the part where the bones are covered with

muscle and skin, and the breath of God puts all those dry bones back on their feet and they begin to dance with God's Spirit ... that part is harder to imagine, harder to picture as being an accurate metaphor for our present day lives.

There are at least two African-American spirituals based upon this passage. One of them goes like this:

Down in the valley the spirit spoke:

'Zekul, go prophesy.

An 'Zekul saw the valley full o' dead man's bones

An' every bone was dry.

Chorus: Dry bones gonna gather in the mornin',

Come together an' rise an' shine.

Dry bones gonna gather in the valley,

An' some o' them bones is mine.

Spirit told 'Zekul call the four winds forth

An' breathe on the bones all slain.

Behold he heard a noise, every bone to his bone

Come together an' lived again.

Thee graves all opened an' the bones took breath,

An' the skin covered over again,

And they stood on their feet like the army of my Lord.

Oh, the bones was livin' men!

Some of them bones is my mother's bones,

Come together for to rise an' shine.

Some o' them bones is my father's bones,

An' some o' them bones is mine.

Some of the dry bones in that valley are yours and mine. That is a recurring theme in several spirituals. These stories are not about somebody else. Some of these bones are yours and mine. I'm standing in the need of prayer - not my mother, not my father, not the preacher not the deacon - but "It's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer." "Brother will you trust in the Lord, Sister will you trust in the Lord, Preacher will you trust in the Lord" - if you sing enough verses you finally get to the one that is about you. Today these scriptures are about us. Can our dry bones live? Will you prophesy in the valley of death? Will you be God's messenger of life to communities of despair?

Yes, the story is about me, it is about us, and it is about all of us. The spirituals and the scriptures work on both a personal level and a corporate level. They are about the individual and they are about the community. Ezekiel's vision was of an exiled, beaten down, despairing community of people getting back on their feet again. Some of the dry bones in the valley are yours and mine. But if only our bones rise from the dust, Ezekiel's vision is left unfulfilled. Ezekiel's vision connects with Paul's vision of the Church as the Body of Christ. The bones that are being knit together again are the feet and the hands of the body of which Christ is the head. It is the whole community that is being renewed.

When we hear the song about "dem bones" coming together again to rise and shine, it is much more than a simple way to teach children about anatomy. It is a social justice song – a defiant song – a song about the community being knit together despite

oppressive powers that separate families and threaten death. “You will not beat us down!” These bones, this community, these people are going to rise and shine!

It is not just about one slave escaping. It is about slavery coming to an end. It is not just about an individual soul enduring the suffering of the world and escaping to paradise. It is about the fullness of life for all of us here, when God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Some of these bones that dance again in the Spirit of God are your bones and my bones. We are Ezekiel, having been instructed to prophesy to the dry bones, to proclaim the message of life in a valley of death. And we are Lazarus. Jesus is calling our name today, bidding us to come out of our tomb. Lord, we hear your voice. Guide us to the light. Amen.