

Lent 5 2020.

The two stories that we read this morning – that classic story of the valley of dry bones and the story of the raising of Lazarus are potent reminders of the power of God to breathe life into places of despair and death. They are stories not of resurrection but of resuscitation. Ezekiel is given a vision of a valley of the dry bones and God shows him how these bones of people long dead can be given new life. Even though they are in exile and facing the extinction of their nation God reveals to Ezekiel a vision. God will not only restore Israel but will restore the dead to a new life. This is God's promise to Ezekiel and to Israel, a nation in despair and captivity.

Paul discusses two levels of existence: The physical that will end when our physical resources are exhausted; and the spiritual with the ongoing assurance of life beyond death. Life focused only in this world alone is the way to the death that is ultimately separation from God. The Spirit-filled life is full of energy and intimacy with God now and forever.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is the sixth of seven signs John gives to prove that Jesus is the Messiah/Christ, Son of God, and that through faith in him believers receive eternal life. Even as the event shows Jesus' divine power over death itself, it also shows him as a wonderfully sensitive human being. His love for Lazarus is palpable. Martha and Mary's accusation that Jesus' presence would have averted Lazarus' death tells how real their friendship was. So also did Jesus' tears.

As I have said, it is a story not of resurrection but of resuscitation. Lazarus emerges from his tomb clothed in his old body, a body which will eventually die and decay. He has cheated death but not forever. This isn't the first time that Jesus has demonstrated his power over death. Remember how he went into the room of a young girl whose parents had cried out to Jesus for healing, and of how Jesus, when confronted with the fact that the young girl had died, breathed life back into her and restored her to her family.

If Jesus could do it for these two then why doesn't he do it for us? Why are such miracles limited to the gospel stories? Why, when we cry out to him doesn't he answer us? The answer comes in two weeks' time when we realize that these two stories are just a foretaste of the resurrection of all who call out to him for healing, a real resurrection that is eternal and not a resuscitation of a body that is still subject to the limitations of our earthly existence.

All of these stories are placed at a time in our church's year in which we retell the greatest story in which God turned the world upside down through the resurrection of Jesus. The grave is not the end for us. This doesn't mean that we are resurrected like Lazarus in his smelly bandages, rather that when that end of time comes our resurrection will be like that of Jesus, a resurrection into a new body and into a new existence. The old will have passed away and the new will have come. Just like God's promise to Israel he has promised us a new life, that he hasn't abandoned us and even though we may be just a bunch of spiritual dry bones he will restore us and breathe his spirit into us.

I once went on a retreat that was conducted around the theme of the household of Bethany and its characters. When it came to the character of Lazarus, Grant, the retreat director, invited us to identify with him in the daily living of our spiritual life. Put yourself in Lazarus' shoes, you are sick, mortally ill, and your sisters are calling for the one person who they know can save you – but he is busy doing God's work – too busy for the likes of you. Lord I cried out to you but you did not come.

The inevitable happens and you die and enter the darkness of the tomb. It is a shock, but hey you get used to it. In some ways it is good. It is cool, dark and quiet. No one bothers you. Leave me be and just let me lie here. But no! There is a chink of light and a voice – Lazarus arise. But you know what awaits you – back to a world of pain and sorrow, of worry and betrayal. But the person who leaves the tomb is not the person who went in – Lazarus is transformed.

In our spiritual life there are times for all of us when it seems that Jesus is just not listening. We are

spiritually sick and perhaps even enter the tomb time, a time of blackness and misery. Sometimes we can get used to that misery – even feel comfortable. We blame God for turning his back on us. But all the time we should be waiting for that chink of light and that call and it is up to us to respond and arise like Lazarus. Sometimes when we do leave our spiritual tomb we are still impeded by the bandages that have bound us and we are slowed down or trip up. That baggage of our spiritual tomb can stay with us for some time and stop us from entering into the fullness of our new life.

This is a story of a promise, a story of a God who never gives up on us, a story about never giving up on God, and above all a story of love. Jesus loved Lazarus and Jesus loves us. The gift that Jesus gave to Lazarus is ours because of that love, and that is why Jesus followed that path of death and resurrection to eternal life to show that love as not an empty promise but a journey that he was willing to take for our sake.

Amen.