

“True Humans are Made of Flesh and Bone!”

March 26, 2023

Lent #5

Scriptures: John 11 (selected verses)

1 Now someone named Lazarus from Bethany had fallen ill; it was also the village where Mary and her sister Martha lived... 3 So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, one of your loved ones is sick."
6 But when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he lingered two more days...17 So when Jesus did finally arrive, he learned that Lazarus had been buried four days earlier. 18 Bethany was near Jerusalem, only two miles away, 19 and many Judeans had come to console Martha and Mary as they grieved their brother's death. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, while Mary stayed at home. 21 "Master," Martha said, "if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died. 25 Jesus replied, "I am resurrection and life; those who believe in me, even if they die, will live again, but those who are alive and believe in me they will never die...
32 When Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "If you had been here, my brother would still be alive."
33 When Jesus saw her crying, and those who accompanied her also crying, he was deeply moved, 34 and asked, "Where is he?"
"Lord, come and see," she replied.
35 Then Jesus began to cry.
36 Some said, "See how much he loved him!" 37 But others replied, "He opened the eyes of the blind but failed to keep this man from dying?"
38 Still greatly disturbed, Jesus arrived at the tomb; a cave with a large stone blocking the entrance. 39 Jesus said, "Take away the stone,"
But Martha replied, "But master, by this time the body will stink since it's been at least four days!"
43 Then Jesus shouted at the top of his voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44 And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of burial cloth and his face was also covered in cloth. And Jesus instructed them, "Unbind him, and set him free."

Sermon

In 1937 a 19-year-old Frenchman named Angelo Hays wrecked his motorcycle in a collision, which threw the young man headfirst into a brick wall, fracturing his skull. His face was so disfigured that his parents weren't allowed to view his body. After finding no pulse, local doctors declared him dead and three days later, he was buried. But an insurance company demanded further investigations be launched and so his body was exhumed two days following his interment.

After five days underground and much to the surprise of those forensic investigators, the young man's body was still warm. It seems that the impact of his accident had caused his body to enter into a deep coma, diminishing his need for oxygen and thus enabling him to stay alive even underground. After numerous surgeries and some rehabilitation Angelo fully recovered, dying, (I assume for real this time) in 2008 at the ripe old age of 90! I wasn't able to unearth if he chose to be buried again?

With the recent tragic earthquakes in Syria and Turkey, we were recently reminded again, that along with the massive loss of human life there were also some seemingly miraculous recoveries as survivors continued to be found up to 11 days after the first tremors hit. Many of you may have heard about the infant who was born while under the rubble and rescued unharmed but who was sadly found next to her dead mother.

In fact, if you are into such things, the world record for the longest time trapped underground is 69 days by, "The 33 of San Jose," who were trapped 2,257 feet below the surface after the collapse of the San José copper mine in Chile, in 2010. All 33 men made it safely back to the surface via a rescue capsule that slowly winched each miner up one at a time every 15 minutes. And if you enjoy watching the slightly Hollywoodized drama of real life rescues, I'd recommend the movie, "Thirteen Lives" which is the story of the rescue of members a youth soccer team (ages 11-16 years) and their coach who were trapped in a cave following unexpected heavy rains that had blocked their exit.

So, the passages we just read this morning are stories of the dead who came back to life. But they were not brain-eating Zombies, which seem quite popular in Hollywood these days; rather, they are given life again as breathing and vital human beings. For Ezekiel, his vision was of a whole valley filled with "very dry" bones; or, bones from folks who have been dead a long time!

In John's gospel, the story concerns one of Jesus' best friends, named Lazarus, whom he raised following a four day entombment. In Ezekiel's case the bones represented the people of God, some whom had been killed in battle, as well as others who had been carried away into exile in Babylon. Round about 590 BCE, an invading army of the Babylonian Empire had destroyed the remaining Jewish Kingdom in southern Palestine. (Recall from an early sermon that the Assyrians had destroyed the northern Jewish kingdom in 722 BCE.) The Babylonian Empire then uprooted many of the survivors and forced them on a long march to the distant heart of their empire. Far, far away from their homes and the land that God had supposedly promised to their ancestors, they were now forced not only to learn new customs but also tempted to worship different gods.

How could this have happen? Why did this tragedy happen? Especially to God's chosen, His special people? Surely, they asked such questions of themselves as they trudged eastward to a very uncertain future? *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?"* Despair, depression and hopelessness certainly must have overcome them. The depth of their emotional state is recounted in Psalms 137; *"By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" But how could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"*

Following the fall of Babylon to the Persian King Cyrus in 539 BCE, the Jews were allowed to return and to begin the work of rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem in 537. But it was into that horribly desperate situation, a 70-year epoch of darkness and despair, that Ezekiel proclaimed his vision of hope and promise! Don't give up, keep hope alive, God knows your plight and will not leave you, in the dust of Babylon. The valley of bleached out bones, will rise again, become en fleshed and God's people will live again! But please take note of the final animating ingredient — God's breath or wind of the Spirit blows through each one, enlivening the soul. In earlier passages this Lent we have encountered this same wind, or breath of the God, first hovering over the waters at creation and then in Jesus' promise to Nicodemus, that anyone can be born again.

For the fledgling community that would have surrounded the author of John's Gospel, bringing Lazarus back from the dead would have been a concrete example that every human can be resurrected! And that this resurrection is new life and that this new life can actually begin now, here on earth, just as it will be in heaven! "From here to Eternity," I guess you could say.

Yet it seems that so very few of us mortals actually experience this resurrection, waiting I guess until we die and then go to heaven. But why save the best for last? Both Mary and Martha, in a rather twisted expression of their faith in Jesus' resurrection powers, actually blamed Jesus for their brother's death. Grief, we know, is necessary, even potentially good for us when we lose someone or something dear to us.

Despair, disappointments, pain and injustice are all part of living a fully human life. Humans, all of us, are after all, still made of flesh and bone, bones that can begin to ache and muscles that become sore with the stresses and strains of merely staying alive. But the breath of God, that wind of the Holy Spirit can blow through each one of us, as it seeks to find its home and to dwell within as a internal, eternal and constant spring of new life.

In this story about Lazarus and his sisters, we encounter the very normal human extremes; the sadness of the painful death of someone we love dearly and the glorious experience of resurrected lives. So, I guess, in the end it's a happy story, one that is also very true to real life. A story that intertwines the realities of real human joy and sadness, that all we mortals face. But both Mary and Martha had to first pass through the pain and grief that came with watching their loved one die and Lazarus, too had to actually die first, before any of them could enter into the immense joy that resurrection can bring.

“True Humans are Made of Flesh and Bone!” We are made to feel pain, be hurt, and grieve our losses! But somewhere in our brain or maybe our soul, we are also engineered (perhaps a “chip” has been planted) to also hear the voice of Jesus that calls us to come out from our own caves of despair, grief and self-pity. And just like Lazarus, Jesus wants us to be unbound and to leave our fears and pettiness behind so we can fully embrace the hope that we be set free to truly be fully filled with life again!

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