

Lent 5 A
Ezekiel 37:1-14
John 11:1-45
March 9, 2008

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
Wimberley UMC
Notes not for publication

A preacher tells the story of a woman who

...walked into [her] office late one afternoon wanting to talk to a pastor. She said that she was worried about her spiritual life.

She was a college graduate [who] had worked for the same company for seventeen years. She started working at minimum wage. Each year her responsibilities at the job increased. Each year she asked for a raise. And each year she was denied a raise. Her salary increased only as minimum wage increased. Her parents said, "Don't worry, daughter. Work hard. Work honestly. You will reap the harvest of your labors."

She believed that for the first fifteen years. Then she became discouraged. In time the company changed management, and she was part of the group that was laid off. Two years later, she was still looking for work. And now she was also the sole caretaker for her aging parents.

She said that she didn't think God was hearing her prayers. She thought she was surely doing something wrong. Was there a way to pray that she hadn't tried yet, she asked?

Her friends told her that if she prayed hard enough her prayers would be answered and she would live in the joy of the Lord. She said that she had tried to smile and be happy, but she didn't feel very happy. Her friends said that she would receive her rewards in heaven.

Then she said to [the preacher]: "If this faith stuff doesn't have something to do with receiving on this side of life, then I'm not interested.

"If it doesn't have something to do with some justice on this side of life, then I'm not interested.

"If it doesn't have something to do with some peace on this side of life, then count me out."

Then she concluded her story by asking: "Just where is God anyway? If I could just see some evidence, maybe I could believe. Is God too busy for the likes of me?"

(Nancy H. Sehested, "Can These Bones Live?" www.csec.org, 5/14/95)

Have you ever listened to this story of Lazarus and wondered why it couldn't have been you who got your loved one back? Have you ever stood at a graveside and searched your mind for a way out of your devastation? Have you ever awakened and not been able to get out of bed to face the day and wondered how life could have collapsed on you so completely? You may believe that you're the only one who came here today with the smell of death still in your nostrils, but I assure you, you're not.

Death wears all sorts of faces. It comes to the 98 year-old matriarch who's lived a full life; her family isn't ready to see her go, but they understand. It comes too, though, to the child who dies way before time; this one nobody understands. Another face of death is the one we see on TV, in communities of poverty and countries where people and places get blown up every day. It's the face of death on children who suffer things we call unspeakable and unthinkable, and therefore we try not to speak or think about them. It's the face of death on whole systems of government and economy that give a few people way too much and a whole bunch of people way too little, and the face of death on people who think killing is the only way to get the world to see that injustice. It is death that works on the hearts of good people to make us think we can't do the right thing.

It has a hold of all of us, in big ways and small. And I would invite you to see that panoramic face when you look at Lazarus in the tomb, dead four days, when Jesus could have made it there in time to keep it from happening. We live under this shadow; it is out of our control. Where is your God, Death calls to us, taunting? It can be hard for us to hear, and it can be hard for us to believe, but the scriptures give us a

word of good news today. And the word is that when we're staring into the face of Death, if we'll look around, we'll see Jesus standing there in the middle of it with us. Without fail, this is where we find him.

Some versions of the church would put Jesus out at the finish line, waiting for us to get there, watching the clock and wondering what's taking us so long. I know it's very easy for me to think that's how God looks at my life. I often look at the mistakes I make, the ways I think I'm not doing it right, the ways I cut off my own life or others', that low-grade, pervasive form of death that just eats at us from the inside. And I feel that if I would only try a little harder, only be a little better, if I would just do what I know I'm supposed to do, the death in my life would vanish. And I already know what I would look like raised up, too. The "correct" form for my life looks like this. And in this scenario of mine, God is sitting up there, far from me in whatever my misery, loving me in the abstract but really just waiting for me to get my act together, tired of the same old thing from me for all these years, waiting for me to believe enough, the way I'm supposed to. I didn't learn this view of Jesus in my church, but some churches teach it, and it's sure what I taught myself.

But it's not true. Look through the scriptures, and see where Jesus goes and what situations he inserts himself into. Over and over he goes to places where people are dying—a man born blind who begged in the streets, a man possessed by demon spirits who beats himself with rocks; a woman accused of adultery about to be stoned by a bunch of angry men; a leper living outside the city limits, far away from decent people; a woman bent over and unable to stand up straight, who could meet no one's

eye but could only see feet and the ground; a woman who hemorrhaged for 12 years and could touch no one without making them unclean; a tax collector who bore shame and hatred for cheating and betraying his community. Jesus goes to be with people in the midst of death, and he transforms their experience. He gives them life, where they are in death, in body and in spirit.

And Jesus enters into death in another way. His life-giving acts and presence got him into big trouble. The authorities obsessed with control and power and believing they had the inside route to God's right hand—they were enraged by Jesus. He identified them as part of the problem, and they determined to get rid of him and even any evidence of him. All sorts of healings they equated with the devil, because Jesus performed them on the Sabbath. The blind man healed last week, who finally recognized Jesus as Messiah? They threw him out into the street. And Lazarus, the miracle man, raised from the dead? "...the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus (12:10-11). And of course, we know where this big trouble eventually led Jesus; Holy Week and Christ's last days are just a week away.

Death does not go quietly. It tries to snuff out any hope that flickers at the back of our minds and the bottom of our hearts. Its grip is total and non-negotiable. And so we find ourselves like the prophet Ezekiel, sitting in a valley surrounded by dry bones. The picture conjures up images of mass graves in land where ethnic cleansing has taken place, a horror so enormous that our brains shut down completely. A whole

people cry out, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely" (v. 11).

But sitting there, in the midst of the finality of death, Ezekiel received a word from God. "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: 'O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath [or spirit] 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'" (vv. 4-6). So the prophet spoke that word of God out into the valley of death, and the bones got up, because you know the word of God is powerful, and it does not come back empty. And the bones rattled together, and sinews and muscle and flesh and skin grew upon them. And the prophet called out to the Spirit, and the breath of God blew through the valley and into the bodies, and they stood on their feet, and they lived.

The word of God, whether spoken by the prophet, or the Word that was itself made flesh and carried God's breath within—this Word is present with us, active in us, quickening us whenever we find ourselves dry and dead in that valley. This is the same Word that was present at the creation of the world, that called the stars into being and set sun and moon in their courses. This is Word accompanied by the same breath, or wind, or spirit, (Greek and Hebrew words can both mean all 3) that hovered over the face of the waters of chaos, the breath that our lungs take in even in this moment. This is the God of Life, never far from us, as Jesus has revealed, always stirring things up when we've exhausted all our most clever ideas. When there is no hope, when

death has won, it seems, the final word rests with God. And that word, for us and for the world, is Life.

And so we find the miracle of the raising of Lazarus pointing toward an even greater miracle. For the fact is, Lazarus was still going to die one day. Jesus' miracle was not some sort of magic resuscitation. The miracle was that through the raising of Lazarus, some came to believe in the power of life over death, even in their own lives, not just for other people. My life and yours can be transformed, are being transformed—I heard this week of a young man, 25 years old, who started using meth at 17, to find relief from his fears and insecurities. He's been clean 2 years and is living out the wisdom of gratitude and humility people normally don't learn about till their much older. A marriage I know was ripped apart by online pornography; the couple has stuck it out and done the hard work of discovering what true intimacy is. There are people in our community who have been at the end of their rope, nearly turned out into the street, sometimes with their kids, and they've found help and care at the hands of people in this church, people sitting in this room. It may not be easy; it may not happen when we want it to happen; it may not look the way we thought it would look. But we can trust that the mind-blowing, earth-shattering, life-birthing power of God seeks to come and rest and abide with us. And we can trust that in that power we will find all we need.

We are Christ's people, and he calls to us by name—imagine his voice, hollering your name down into the darkest recesses of your heart... We cannot save ourselves, but we must come when he calls. And when he tells us to prophesy to the bones, we

have to do it. When he tells us to roll the stone away for somebody else, we have to do it. And when he tells us to unbind the one who's just been raised up out of death, we have to do it. Do not be afraid of the miracle that God wants to work in you, in your own life. Death will not have the last word; it is for this Jesus has come.