

March 26, 2023
"You Shall Live"
Psalm 130 / Ezekiel 37:1-14
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

Amy worked with a pastor in seminary who always, without fail, started his sermons with a joke. They almost never had anything to do with the sermon; he just felt like it was important to get the congregation laughing before he got into the heart of it. Break the ice.

I do not typically start sermons with a joke. I hope and trust that there is no ice that needs to be broken. But here goes.

Three friends were discussing death. One of them asked: "What would you like people to say about you at your funeral?"

The first said: "I would like them to say, 'He was a great humanitarian, who really cared about his community.'"

The second said: "They were a great partner and parent, and an example for many to follow."

The third friend said, I hope they would say, "Look, she's moving!"

We did not read it this morning, but the lectionary texts for today include the story from John's gospel of Jesus miraculously bringing Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, back to life.

John's gospel is generally organized around seven miracles, referred to as "signs" – that is, evidence of Jesus' divine identity and purpose. Jesus, God's own, as window to God. This is a primary point of emphasis in John, much more so than in the synoptic gospels.

Turning water into wine is the first of these signs. Raising Lazarus from the dead is the last. All miraculous signs, by John's account, that help fuel the plot to kill Jesus, and provoke the events of Holy Week and Good Friday to come.

With Lazarus already dead for four days, the stench is overwhelming. Others roll away the stone sealing his tomb, and Jesus cries out, "Lazarus, come out!" We're told that the "dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth."

And then Jesus responds, "Unbind him, and let him go." Unbind him, and let him go.

It's easy to get caught up in the miracle of the story. Within this year's lectionary flow, it absolutely serves as a dramatic preview of coming attractions. A resurrection before THE Resurrection.

It's easy to get caught up in the miracle. If your heart has been broken, is broken, by the death of a loved one, or by the pain and suffering of a loved one, or by the death or pain or suffering of others you don't even know, or by your own pain and suffering, you know what it is to long for, to pray for, a healing miracle.

Within the sometimes overwhelming intensity of your grief, you know what it is to long for healing – and for the possibility, EVEN, of resurrection. To undo what has been done. You feel it deep down in your bones.

Which brings us to the text from Ezekiel. This is a text I preached on for the first time three years ago, at the start of the pandemic – in the context of what was already, and increasingly, feeling like a valley of dry bones.

The prophet's dream-like vision of standing in the valley of the dry bones speaks directly to a people in exile. A people in the wilderness whose bones are dried up. Feeling, as the text describes, cut off. Without hope. Good as dead. And, it's safe to say, longing for a miracle.

"Mortal, can these bones live?" God asks in the vision. Can THESE bones live?

In the context of what is described like a battlefield, a graveyard of the slain, where life has not been honored but desecrated, where life seems to be long lost, we hear in the voice of God a reminder that we are never truly cut off from the source of life—even though we continue to find ways, so many ways (God help us; God, hear our prayer), to

cut ourselves and each other off from it. As human beings, we continue to find ways to make life harder for ourselves and tragically so for each other than it can already be all by itself.

We also hear in the voice of God the gospel good news that death does not mean the end of life. Not that the dead are miraculously resurrected, as Ezekiel's vision goes, as our own longing and prayers may go, but that WE can be. The WHOLE COMMUNITY can be. The WHOLE EARTH can be.

God the Animator, whose Spirit is buoyed by the spirits of those who have gone before us, remains with us – with the capacity, always, to resurrect OUR spirits. And so to resurrect OUR lives, individually and collectively.

That we might LIVE, fully and abundantly, and not simply be alive.

What does life, new life, resurrection, look like in the face of pain and suffering? In the face of death? When our souls are weighed down by sorrow, waiting and longing – as the Psalmist describes?

Through the wilderness, through the valleys of dry bones, of the shadow of death, we necessarily grieve. It's important that we grieve.

On the whole, we are not good at grieving. If you don't believe me, talk to a hospice chaplain about it sometime. But it's SO important that we prioritize it, allow plenty of space to hear and hold our individual and collective grief.

Enabling and even embracing our grief is part of what it means to live abundantly, leaning into the full range of our God-given human emotion.

On that note allow me to share a poem from Steve Garnaas-Holmes:

*It is necessary to weep for the world,
that has not learned to weep for itself.
So much to mourn!: lost loves and dreams,
hopes and possibilities,
memories of futures denied,
all of us bearing pieces of our hearts around
like sacks of stones.*

*And if we don't grieve—don't dare to,
or don't know how—
we try to offload those stones onto others,
sometimes throw them, especially at strangers,
especially at loved ones.*

*All war and murder, all tyranny and greed
is only grief unwept, spilling out,
thrown upon the world in desperation.*

*Be tender with your grief,
let it flow in tears and songs, that it not become a stone.
And be tender with this grieving world
that still has yet to learn
how to make of broken stones and broken glass
a cathedral of hope and beauty.*

Like the Psalmist, we cry out of the depths for the merciful, forgiving, re-animating Spirit of God to breathe new life into us and into our communities and into the world around us. To make of our broken stones and broken glass a cathedral of hope and beauty.

Through all manner of pain and suffering, we cry out for the strength, the LIFE, of the loved ones we have lost, of our ancestors, whose voices echo the voice of God in calling us OUT from our graves and tombs. From whatever binds us to death. Calling us BACK to life – life full and abundant. Life made new again.

Our own and each other's. Our own and the earth's.

"I will cause breath – *ruah* – to enter you, and you shall live. ... I will put my spirit – *ruah* – within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil ..." Restored to fertile ground, you shall live!

The very breath and spirit – *ruah* – flowing at Creation flows in our RE-creation. YOU SHALL LIVE!

Paul famously asserts in his letter to the Corinthians, "So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

Faith believes in the possibility of life even when all you see and feel and know is death.

Hope, UNRELENTING hope, leans into the possibility of life, imagines it, dreams about it, sets the stage for it, holds vigil on its behalf.

And love is the greatest of these because it realizes the possibility of life. It makes life real, puts sinews and flesh and skin on its bones, bone to bone, fills its lungs with the breath of the four winds, the spirit of God. It calls us back to life again and again and again. Love is the very breath of life. We are made by Love to love and be loved—that is the divine breath within us. That is the divine breath within us.

Love breathes new life where life is interrupted.

Where life is stifled.

Where life is diminished.

Where life is marked by pain and suffering.

Where life is hanging on by a thread.

Where life is buried under the weight of injustice.

Come out! Come out! Come out!

In his book of essays, *The Book of Delights*, Ross Gay describes his walk home after running some errands – spotting a flower as it emerges from a concrete curb. It's bright, and he assumes at first that it's just a piece of trash.

“But as I got closer,” he writes, “sure enough, it was some kind of gorgeous flower, mostly a red I don't think I actually have words for, a red I've maybe only ever seen in this flower growing out of the crack between the curb and the asphalt street ... The gold is like a corona around the petals, and there are a few flecks throughout, the way people will have freckles in their eyes or glints of lightning in their pupils. And beside this flower, or kin with it, growing from the same stem as the blazing, is an as-yet-unwrapped bud, greenish with the least hint of yellow, shining in the breeze, on the verge, I imagine, of exploding.”

Imagine. Life, new life, exploding from the graves and tombs and cracks in the concrete curbs of our lives and of our so-broken and yet so-beautiful world – where life no longer seems possible.

Imagine, with faith and hope and love. Filled with the breath of the four winds, God's animating Spirit. *Ruah*.

I close with the same blessing that we breathed our way into worship with this morning – adapted to the collective 'we.' A blessing for ourselves, each of us, all of us, for our hearts and our souls waiting and longing through the pain and suffering of wilderness, crying out from the depths of our being:

*May (these hearts)
of dry cracked earth,
this soul,
a valley of dry bones
strewn in heaps,
desolate
feel Your breath.*

*May this breath live within (us)
as a quenching rain
with power to raise shattered frames,
assemble order from disorder,
and connect the disconnected.
Fill (our) flesh, muscle and sinew
with a divine promise manifest
in motion and direction.*

*May Your rain not be fleeting,
Nor (we) content with the fragile flowers
of the first bloom.
They are nothing but a thin wisp of color
atop this wretched floor.*

*Turning skyward with anticipation,
may (we) receive your word to create
a new climate, clean and flowering.
Moved by Your Spirit.
Your Wind.
Your Breath.*

You shall live. May it be so.