

March 29, 2020
“Life Interrupted“
Ezekiel 37:1-14 & John 11:17-44
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

Under our current circumstances, it's fair to say that these texts are probably—for many, if not all, of us—hard to hear. We are already, in this historic moment, surrounded by illness and death and despair. By the threat of it, by the weight of it. Presumably you come to church, you came to church, looking for a break. For a balm.

These are just two of the lectionary texts for this Sunday, and I considered going a different direction. But I didn't. And I guess because I'm finding it so difficult, increasingly difficult, to escape the unrelenting intensity of these days. Last week felt hard, this week has been much harder. I am pushing up against my limitations. I'm feeling more emotional, weepy at times, more fragile. I'm feeling more afraid for my own personal and professional circles, even as I know that there are millions more and counting, by the day, who have it far worse than we do. Who already did. And so I'm also feeling more angry about an inept and heart-less administration that's making a terrible situation worse, and about the death-dealing global capitalist machine whose lust for profits over the well-being of people and the planet is even more clearly under indictment.

We know there is a better way, but resurrection reads like a fairy tale when what you're seeing and feeling is wilderness and dry bones.

For that reason, I'm wanting to give us as much time as possible for Joys and Concerns. To honor the space we all need, held in loving community, to simply feel and express what we're feeling.

So I mean to get to the point.

In the first text, the prophet Ezekiel's dream-like vision of standing in the valley of the dry bones speaks to a people in exile. A people cut off. In wilderness. Without hope.

In the setting of what is described like a battlefield, a graveyard of the slain, where life has not been honored but desecrated, I 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 to cut ourselves and each other off from it. Physically and otherwise.

And I hear in the text, or maybe I just want to hear in the text in these dark days, that death does not mean the end of life. Not that the dead are miraculously resurrected, in the flesh as Ezekiel's vision goes, but that their spirits have the capacity to resurrect ours. And so to resurrect our lives.

Through the wilderness, we call on the strength, the life, of our individual and collective ancestors, whose voices echo the voice of God in calling us back to life. Our own and each other's.

One of my favorite Bruce Springsteen songs (and there are many) speaks to the power of the dead, of those no longer with us in the flesh whose lives courageously insisted on life, demanded justice, whose spirits continue to enliven ours, calling us to carry the torch. The chorus goes like this:

We are alive
And though our bodies lie alone here in the dark
Our souls and spirits rise
To carry the fire and light the spark
To fight shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart

And so too, Julia Esquivel Velásquez, the Guatemalan poet, theologian and human rights activist, in her famous poem "They Have Threatened Us With Resurrection." She writes in 1980, in the midst of the bloody 30-year period in Guatemala's history marked by military dictatorships, by the suppression of progressive movements for justice, and by the genocide of indigenous peoples – beginning in 1954 with a U.S.-backed mercenary army coup.

The poem is worth a full reading, but I'm skipping ahead and around a bit, in the interest of time:

What keeps us from sleeping
is that they have threatened us with Resurrection!

Because every evening
though weary of killings,
an endless inventory since 1954,
yet we go on loving life
and do not accept their death!

They have threatened us with Resurrection
Because we have felt their inert bodies,
and their souls penetrated ours
doubly fortified,
because in this marathon of Hope,
there are always others to relieve us
who carry the strength
to reach the finish line
which lies beyond death.

They have threatened us with Resurrection
because they will not be able to take away from us
their bodies,
their souls,
their strength,
their spirit,
nor even their death
and least of all their life.

Because they live
today, tomorrow, and always
in the streets baptized with their blood,
in the air that absorbed their cry,
in the jungle that hid their shadows,
in the river that gathered up their laughter,
in the ocean that holds their secrets,
in the craters of the volcanoes,

Pyramids of the New Day,
which swallowed up their ashes.

They have threatened us with Resurrection
because they are more alive than ever before,
because they transform our agonies
and fertilize our struggle,
because they pick us up when we fall,
because they loom like giants
before the crazed gorillas' fear.

They have threatened us with Resurrection,
because they do not know life (poor things!).

That is the whirlwind
which does not let us sleep,
the reason why sleeping, we keep watch,
and awake, we dream.

The gospel text, within the narrative arc of John's gospel, provides a bit of foreshadowing, a preview of things to come (more on that in a couple of weeks!). Jesus raises Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, from the dead.

What I hear in this story I hear in just one verse. Entering the tomb where her brother is buried, Martha acknowledges the stench, Lazarus having been dead for four days.

And it is Jesus' response that resonates for me this morning. This verse, verse 40, before the resurrection itself: Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

If you believed, you would see the glory of God. And what is the glory of God, friends? As the church fathers remind us, the glory of God, the creator, is creation fully alive. That goes for us and every living thing, and it goes for the earth itself. Life flourishing, life persisting.

If you believe, you will see the glory of God. You will see and know life, even in death.

This is faith. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Corinthians that the spiritual life is marked by faith, hope and love, and that the greatest of these is love.

Faith believes in the possibility of life even when you are afraid, when all you see and feel 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 flesh on its bones, 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.

Love breathes life where life is interrupted. Where life is stifled. Where life is diminished. Where life is hanging on by a thread. Where life is buried under the weight of injustice. Come out! Come out! Come out!

Julia Esquivel closes her poem like this:

Join us in this vigil
and you will know what it is to dream!
Then you will know how marvelous it is
to live threatened with Resurrection!

To dream awake,
to keep watch asleep,
to live while dying,
and to know ourselves already
resurrected!

Friends, as we join in this vigil, in this marathon of hope, may it be so.