

Old Bones  
St. John's, NF  
April 6, 2014A  
Lent 5 Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45

Last Sunday we looked at the three incidents in the gospels of Jesus healing a blind man, and we explored the metaphor of blindness. Blindness is the state of all humanity; we all need to have our eyes opened, to see anew truth and justice, the wonders of life, the rich possibilities even while we are wandering in the valleys of shadows and death. Today's readings explore another Biblical metaphor to describe a common way of living, dead though alive. The gospel passage itself connects both metaphors, for "Some of the [people in Bethany watching Jesus] said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept [Lazarus] from dying?'" Just as Jesus spoke of sighted people who were blind, so he spoke of living people who were dead.

Perhaps you will recall one of Jesus' most radical sayings: "Let the dead bury their own dead." It is a shocking statement, but brilliant too. The meaning is clear—there is a way of living that amounts to living in the land of the dead, in a valley of dry bones. But this clever line by Jesus also affirms that it is possible to leave the land of the dead. As with so many of Jesus' sayings, it both indicts and invites; it shows us our mistake and the way to change our ways.

This metaphor of death as a way of living appears for example in the parable of the prodigal son. Twice the father in the parable describes his wayward son as having been dead: “This son of mine was dead,” “This brother of yours was dead.” Now obviously, the prodigal son was alive while he lived in the foreign country, but his life there is described metaphorically as the state of being dead. One can be spiritually dead even though physically alive.

So the metaphor of death is central to the story of the resurrection of Lazarus, who was not only buried in a tomb, but had been dead for four days. “He stinketh,” warns Martha in the KJV as Jesus commands the stone be rolled away. Like many of the stories in John, it is a symbolic one, a metaphorical narrative. Very few scholars accept that it is history remembered. The story is told only in the gospel of John, written in the last decade of the first century of the CE, 60 years or more after the life of Jesus. But whatever one thinks about the story as factual history, the way it is told points to its meaning.

Its meaning is Jesus’ declaration, found only in John’s gospel, “I am the resurrection and the life.” John used last week’s story of the healing of a blind man as the occasion for Jesus to say, “I am the light of the world”; here the story allows Jesus to say, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

Martha meets Jesus coming toward the village and informs him that her brother Lazarus has died. Now notice the pattern of their dialogue:

Jesus makes a statement: “Your brother will rise again.”

Martha takes the words literally and misunderstands: “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

Jesus corrects her misunderstanding: “I am the resurrection and the life.”

It is the same pattern in John’s story of Nicodemus and Jesus: Jesus says one “must be born anew,” Nicodemus takes the words literally and misunderstands, and Jesus corrects his misunderstanding, “You must be born from above.” The structure of John’s storytelling shifts meaning from literal to metaphor.

The dialogue also shifts the time from future to the present. Martha refers to the resurrection as an event in the future, “on the last day,” but Jesus in his answer uses the present tense, “I AM the resurrection and the life.” Jesus speaks of resurrection as a present, living reality. Jesus is “resurrection and life” who brings life to the dead, just as he is “the light of the world” who brings sight to the blind. Lazarus represents all of us, dead and bound in a tomb. Lazarus comes forth, still wrapped in the clothing of death, and Jesus ends the story with the words, “Unbind him, and let him go.” Jesus summons his dead friend, Lazarus, to new life in the face of death. Jesus is the resurrection and the life, not at the last day, but already, in the

here and now. The faithful receive new life, again and again and again, through the power and love of God.

The story of the raising of Lazarus in John's gospel fleshes out, if you will, the OT story from Ezekiel; it puts flesh on "dem dry bones" to dramatize the meaning. In today's reading from Ezekiel, the prophet is offered a vision of the "dry bones" of Israel brought to new life by the spirit of God. The OT imagery refers to the homecoming and restoration of Israel, but the meaning concerns resurrection of the living dead. In this context, resurrection is the power and will of God to restore this defeated, displaced, despairing people, after it has been routed and humiliated by the forces of empire, to real life in the world. "Resurrection faith" is portrayed in both these OT & NT passages.

The psalm today suggests that God's power for life takes the form of forgiveness that frees from the burdens of sin and guilt that immobilize people. As is evident in so many of the Jesus stories, the gift of life and readiness to forgive are synonymous (see Mark 2:9). The power of death enslaves; the power of guilt immobilizes. And God, in these passages, manifests the power to liberate and reconcile. It is no wonder that Paul waxes eloquent about the resurrection that is a continuing force, as God's spirit "dwells in you" (Romans 8:11). Resurrection is a continual state of being, empowering us to live abundantly, to love extravagantly and to be all that we can be.

Written as it was at the end of the first century CE, the story of the raising of Lazarus reflects the experience of John's Christian community in that time, as they had been brought from death to life through Jesus, just as they had been brought from darkness into light. And it's our experience too, the Anglican churches in Niagara Diocese, who know all about new life in old bones. There are several churches striving and surviving, some even thriving, supported primarily by elderly parishioners, in their 70s & 80s. For example, St John's Stevensville, my first interim appointment: on my first day on the job I had to chair the parish council; as we were discussing the plans for the coming weeks, I blurted out, "Does March break affect any of these plans?" My question was met with silence, so I looked up at the faces before me and the warden said, "We're all over 70. March break only makes a difference to the grandkids." They are a small but amazing group of hard-working seniors, proud of their church, of their stewardship, of their amazingly well supported community events, and of their concern for each other, especially those in their midst most in need of comfort and love. That small handful of seniors, many in their mid-80s, are truly amazing to watch in action, and they take pride in offering honest home cooking, and never running out of food. St John's Winona, my second assignment, is like St. Johns Stamford with contemporary worship and a welcoming attitude to children. Its few seniors work together with a few younger members in their 60s to keep the place

going and growing. “Monty Python and the Holy Grail”: “I’m not dead yet.”

New life in old bones is the experience of St. John’s Stamford too as you explore contemporary language and new songs for praise and thanksgiving, and as you enter partnership with several social service agencies to better the lives of individuals and the community. Advice from a wellness speaker at Clergy conference last June: “People on the move are still alive. So keep moving!” The church like many volunteer societies depends on the energy and spirit of retired folk. Often older folk, weary, lament the lack of younger members to take up the tasks of the church. Times have changed, working mothers, working parents, two-income family today is challenged to make ends meet. There are more opportunities seven days a week for leisure activities, especially sports and classes for children and youth. I know from watching my own children work and raise their children that young adults are stretched to the limit. Resentment and anger won’t win others over, in fact, will turn people away. Hang on to hope. The busy younger members with whom I have talked speak eloquently and movingly of their appreciation of this church family which inspires and strengthens them to fulfill their calling out their in the wider world. I encourage you all, not to stop trying, not to give up, but remember Christ’s call to Lazarus, to new life. With God’s help, St. John’s Stamford will keep on working to transform the valley of bones into a spiritually alive community.