



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent 5 (A)

Death

[RCL] Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

These long readings from John's Gospel during Lent have a depth and a power to them that can, if we take them into our hearts, reach the very core of our lives. Today we hear about death and new life, about the end of some things, and, perhaps, the beginning of others. Death is always a topic close to home, one that seems to get closer every year. On the eve of Palm Sunday and Holy Week, it's particularly immediate.

So, it makes good sense to hear Ezekiel preach to the valley of dry bones, and to listen to Jesus command, "Lazarus, come out"—and to wonder what all that means and whether it matters.

We Christians have some very distinctive, and some very special, things to say about death—about both real, physical death and about the other deaths, the smaller deaths, the endings and changes and losses that we seem constantly to be experiencing. In fact, we say much the same thing about both types of death. What it is can be found in both Ezekiel and John.

The valley of dry bones Ezekiel is looking at and talking to is Israel. The great nation God had raised up to be a blessing for all the world is gone. There are a handful of exiles in Babylon with a few memories, fewer hopes, and a lot of hate for the people they are blaming for their problems. (There were also, they supposed, the so-called "lost tribes" that had been dragged off by the Assyrians a couple of centuries earlier.) And there are a few folks left in Judah that the Babylonians figured weren't worth the effort to haul off. That was it. Israel was dead. Never in the history of mankind had, or has, a nation (or a faith) so defeated and so scattered ever been rebuilt.

Ezekiel knew that, the Babylonians knew that, *everybody* knew that. Death ruled Israel when Ezekiel preached, and death ruled supreme.

So with Lazarus. Lazarus, like Israel, was dead. Really dead. Graveyard dead. In fact, Lazarus was dead past three days, and the rabbis taught that after that long, all that was left was corruption. Maybe Jesus could have helped if he'd arrived earlier, but not now. Death ruled over Lazarus.

So, Ezekiel looked over the valley of dry bones, and Jesus looked at the stone in front of the cave where his friend's body lay. When we Christians are at our best, we look at death with the eyes of Ezekiel, and of Jesus, and we see what they saw.

The first thing they saw was the reality and the force and the pain and the sheer power of death. Ezekiel was struck mute (a very rare event)—and ended up babbling about how dry the bones were. And Jesus was shaken; he was deeply troubled; he wept. There is nothing lighthearted or glib here. Death is the final word creation has to say to us. There is nothing in nature after death but decay.

At its worst, Christianity has tried to deny this and has been ashamed of the tears of Jesus. At its worst, Christianity has said that our faith means that death isn't all that important, that it really doesn't matter—and that grief, the real life-shattering, gut-tearing, amputating grief that hurts so terribly, that this is somehow not fully Christian.

We've taught this to our shame, and we have been wrong – dead wrong. Death is very real and death is very powerful, and if we don't say this first, then we're simply not telling the truth. The tears of Jesus sanctify every tear, and his deeply troubled spirit makes holy our own grief, pain, and fear in the face of death.

There is nothing in this world stronger or more final than death, and there is nothing in this world that can rebuild what death tears down.

When Ezekiel looked at those dry bones, and when Jesus stood at Lazarus' tomb, they didn't see death naturally blossoming into new life—they didn't see butterflies coming out of cocoons, or bunnies popping out of eggs, or disembodied souls hovering around somewhere flapping silly wings. If Ezekiel had kept his mouth shut, those bones would have stayed dry. If Jesus had not called, Lazarus would have stayed in that tomb. Again, there is nothing natural about anything stronger than death.

All of this is the first thing Ezekiel and Jesus saw, and it's the first thing we see. Death is real and it's powerful and it hurts and it destroys. They both saw that. But they saw something more.

What Ezekiel saw, and what Jesus saw, was that God was Lord, Lord even over death. God was Lord even over a dead Israel—and so God, and God alone, could call Israel back, and give it new life, and new direction. The wonderful part of this story is not that some dry bones could move—the wonderful part of this story is that the Spirit of the Lord would not be stopped, and that even death could not destroy the purposes of God.

So with Lazarus. The real point of his story is not that Lazarus came back. Before too long, Lazarus died again, and Jesus wasn't there, and Lazarus stayed very dead. So that's not much of a point. The real point is that Jesus is Lord of the living and the dead. The real point is that the voice of Jesus carries—it carries even through the walls of the grave, and his word is the clearest word, and the strongest word, and the last word. That's the good news, that's what we Christians see that the world does not see.

We see, even through our tears, that the word of God, and the purposes of God, and the love of God cannot be silenced, cannot be stopped, and *will* not be stopped. Not even by the strongest, and the worst, that the world has to offer—and offer the worst the world will.

At the same time, notice that these stories give us absolutely no information about the mystery of death itself.

Published by the Office of Communication of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

© 2023 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.

No matter how hard we try to know about the secrets of death, and thereby have some bit of power over it, death remains the great unknown. Nor do these stories promise that everything will be alright, or that they will be terrible, as we count such things.

Lazarus doesn't become a celebrity and go on some first-century Oprah show and talk about tunnels and bright lights and four days' worth of even-nearer-than-near-death experiences. There's none of that. What's more, John's Gospel tells us that Lazarus' life got quite a bit messier and more complicated after this miracle. He really didn't live happily ever after, as we count such things.

And Israel never again became what it used to be or what it wanted to be. The dry bones formed into something very different, something less powerful, and less successful, but truer to its mission, than Israel had wanted, and hoped and prayed for. The promise of new life is not a promise that we are in charge and that we will get what we want.

The promise is better than that. The promise is that God, in Jesus Christ, is Lord even of the dead, even of death itself. And that what he says, goes. That's what we Christians see. Alas, we can see no farther—we can see no more, and we should not claim to see more. But we can see that. Of course, we want more, we want details, and we want guarantees, and we want some power and some control in all of this. But we don't get any of that, not in the face of physical death, not in the midst of the other deaths, the smaller deaths.

Instead, in the face of all the deaths that make up our lives, we are told first that death is stronger than we are and that we have neither knowledge about nor power over death. And then we are told that Jesus is Lord, Lord of all—Lord of life and of death.

So, we must choose. Whatever deaths are before us, we must choose.

We must choose to despair or to trust; to give up or to go on; to abandon hope, or to let go in faith. That choice is not made for us but is instead given to us. And that choice can be terribly hard. More than at any other time, the reality of death—death in whatever form—is a call to trust, indeed, to trust blindly.

For we see all that the world sees, and yet we see more. We see that the dry bones, even our dry bones, can live once more. And we see that the word of Jesus has power. “Come out,” the Lord calls. “Come out” into different life, into new life. “Come out” into life unknown and unexplained. “Come out” in trust and in hope.

***The Rev. James Liggett** is the retired rector of St. Nicholas' Episcopal Church in Midland, Texas. He is a native of Kansas and a graduate of the University of Houston and the Episcopal Divinity School. He has served parishes in Kansas, Texas, and Oklahoma. He can be reached by mail at 3518 Hyde Park Ave.; Midland, TX 79707, and via E-mail at jim@liggetts.org.*