

Fifth Sunday in Lent
Sermon for March 9, 2008
Raymond Raney

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 130
Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45

Mary and Martha, the sisters of perpetual strife, send a desperate message to Jesus:
“Lord, the one you love is ill.”

I’m sure that they expected him to drop everything and make his way to Bethany.

Any of you would have left immediately. I would have. When my aunt died recently, I was immediately on the phone to arrange a flight.

But not Jesus. “Though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus ... he stayed two days longer where he was.” Why would he wait – two days?

I remember when I was in college (the first time) my grandmother was hospitalized with a heart attack. I made my way to the hospital as soon as I heard. When I arrived at the hospital, my grandmother was connected to all the machines you can imagine. Her heart beat paced and her pulse rate blinked on the monitor. The respirator breathed for her. And I spent an hour in prayer that if she cannot be brought back to life, that she at least be allowed to die with dignity.

By the time Jesus does get there, Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. Both Martha and Mary respond: “Lord if you had only been here.” And the witnesses wonder aloud: “Couldn’t he who opened the eyes of the blind man, have saved Lazarus from death?” The crowd whispers, “Couldn’t the man who opened the eyes of the man born blind, have saved Lazarus from death?”

I prayed all week for my grandmother, and the next week, I rode down to the hospital with my father. He dropped me off and I went in while he parked the car. When I walked up to my grandfather, he was sitting in a chair outside the door of my grandmother’s room. He looked up at me and said: “Helen’s dead.”

I was crushed, but I played the man, and took a really deep breath. I helped my grandfather to his feet and took his arm and helped him up to the waiting room. There was nothing else I could do. There, with him, I watched my father walk up to me, and I told him: “Mamma’s dead.”

I felt as if there must have been something I could do. I felt it was my fault that she was dead. I felt guilty. I said nothing else. There was nothing I could do, nothing my father could do, nothing that anyone could do. There was no longer any hope. I just kept breathing deeply. When I was at home, some hours later, I broke down completely. I felt that I had lost the person I loved most in the world. I cried.

Jesus wept. Standing there, hearing the pain that Mary and Martha were suffering. Feeling the grief of those who had come to mourn with them. Feeling the disappointment of them all. Seeing the loss of hope that had prompted the sisters to beckon Jesus to Bethany. Jesus wept.

What else could he do? What else could I do? Just weep. The dead are dead. There is no hope.

Nearly 600 years before Jesus, Ezekiel sees a vision of absolute hopelessness: a field of bones. This is not just an imaginary field of bones. These are the dead from the great battle with the forces of Babylon that swept away the army of Israel. The men of the army of Israel – all dead. Their bones are bleaching in the sun. These armies met and Israel was defeated. And the leaders of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah, anyone with any value, were taken into exile in Babylon. Ezekiel stands in a place of darkness. There is no hope – none. Two hundred years before the Babylonian victory, the armies of Assyria swept over the northern Kingdom and destroyed the ten tribes. They disappeared and their cities were wiped from the face of the earth. Ezekiel stood where there was no hope.

And in this dark place, Ezekiel is given a vision that this is not hopeless. Unlike the ten tribes, the Lord God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the people that life will come from death.

“I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act.”

That also is the promise Paul gives us in his letter to the church in Rome.

“If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.”

“Out of the depths have I called you,” the Psalm begins. And out of the depths Jesus calls to his friend.

“Lazarus, come out!”

This call, despite Martha’s caution: “he’s been in there four days, he smells,” summons Lazarus from the depths of death, from the darkness of the tomb, to stand again in the light. This dead man walks again – living again in this life to love and be loved.

“I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus tells them. “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

The dead man comes out, wrapped in clothes, bound by the fabric of death. Jesus looks upon his friend, and gives us a message that reverberates from then to now: “unbind him, and let him go.”

We have been called forth from the tomb. We are no longer lost in the darkness; we have been shown the light. We are no longer bound to sin. We are no longer wrapped in death. We have had our bonds cut, and Christ has set us free.

As we say in the burial service,
For none of us has life in himself,
and none becomes his own master when he dies.

For if we have life, we are alive in the Lord,
and if we die, we die in the Lord.
So, then, whether we live or die,
we are the Lord's possession.

We also have the opportunity during the burial service to say the King James version of the Twenty-Third Psalm. In a moment I'll ask that you join me in saying it. If you don't know it by heart, you'll find it on page 476 of the Prayer Book.

I find the reassurance in this Psalm that John gives us in the raising of Lazarus, the same reassurance that Paul intends in his letter to the Romans, and the same reassurance God gives Ezekiel to prophesy to a forlorn people in exile in Babylon.

If you would, please join me in saying:

Psalm 23 *King James Version*

The Lord is my shepherd; *
I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; *
he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul; *
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his
Name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; *
for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of
mine enemies; *
thou anointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days
of my life, *
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

“Did I not tell you that if you believed that you would see the Glory of God!”

“I am the resurrection and the life. Ye who believe in me shall not perish but shall have life for ever more.”

That is the great promise. By that hope we live and in that hope we die. We are the Lord's and none other. That is the promise that those we love, those who have gone before, will greet us when we enter the light and are embraced in the loving arms of our Lord.

Amen.