

Scriptures:

Ezekiel 37:1-14

John 11:1-45

Resurrection Moments

Several years ago I went to a one man show in which the scriptures were read out dramatically. Nothing was added, nothing was taken away. Today's scriptures deserve that kind of profound reading. If we were to witness them read as they were being told or experienced for the first time it would be hard to leave here without your spirit being deeply moved. You would likely have a resurrection moment right here and now. One day I'm going to give that a try again because I think we get wrapped up in our own stuff sometimes when we preach or even when we sit in a pew, and we miss the beauty of the story and promise.

Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones coming to life is offered alongside the stories of death and life from John 11 for good reason. This passage also occurs at two other times in our lectionary: on Pentecost, and as part of the Easter Vigil. In each setting, a different dimension of Ezekiel 37 is foregrounded. "Perhaps the story is best known from Pentecost, where the role of God's spirit stands out most strikingly. The Hebrew word *ruah*, meaning "breath" and "wind" as well as "spirit," is repeated ten times in these fourteen verses -- four times in the climactic verse 9 alone: - I love this image so much that when I was a younger adult I dreamed of one day owning a sailboat and I knew I was going to name her "Ruah" - breath or wind of God - I chose the wrong profession from which to buy my own boat and sail the world so instead I named my daughter 'wind' and that will have to do for now at least.

Today however the emphasis of our scripture is found in the "very question of death and life, offering listeners a gentle inoculation against the horrors to come in less than two weeks on Good Friday. Beside this story echo the pensive words of Psalm 130: "Out of the depths I cry to you ... I wait for the Lord, my soul waits ... more than those who watch for the morning." Ezekiel speaks from Babylon, exiled from a country that has died, its temple and capital city destroyed. Like earlier prophets, Ezekiel understands this disaster not simply as the unfortunate result of Babylon's empire-building. To him, "...Judah's people and especially their leaders brought this devastation upon themselves by their disobedience to God."¹

The prophet believes every one of us has the opportunity to make decisions that are life-giving or life-crushing. Ezekiel does not have a lot of hope for the Judea's. As far as he can tell they will choose the later. They are no more likely to choose life-giving goodness and truth than lifeless bones are able to get up and walk. But he preaches and he teaches anyway, facing a constant life conundrum - do I keep preaching hope and life or do I just let them die?

Fortunately somehow out of his hopeless state Ezekiel discovers grace and he remembers from dust we came. Ezekiel remembers that God has initiated life out of the dust before and he

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3200

rediscovers hope in the promise that God will bring life. The prophet rediscovers this promise over and over again throughout the scriptures. (Ezekiel 11:19-20) says “I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God...

This new heart is nothing the people can obtain for themselves. The new spirit is not their own, but God’s, a spirit enabling them to do what they could not before. Divine initiative and human action are interwoven throughout this passage. It is God who leads Ezekiel to the valley and directs his attention and speech. It is the prophet who sees, and describes, the utterly dry bones, and responds by doing as he is asked, ordering the desiccated bones to hear God’s word. As he does so, with no help from the bones themselves (what could the dead do?), God brings them together.

God adds sinews, tendons to attach them; flesh, muscles to make them strong, and skin to give them form. Yet still they lie lifeless. It is only when God tells the prophet to speak to the *ruah* -- the spirit, or breath -- and Ezekiel does so, that the spirit breath blows from the four winds and the bodies live and stand... Ezekiel calls to the spirit; the spirit enters the people; they come to life.”²

It’s God’s grace that carries out the life abundance that we cannot muster up out of our own dead, dry, fear-filled places.

That is what this whole lenten journey is about, it is about being covered with the dust and the ash, getting back to the bare bones and walking with Jesus to discover new life... walking through the wilderness to discover the resurrection.

In the season of lent we carry the image of Jesus tempted in the wilderness, for forty days we fast, meditate and pray. (well at least that is the tradition). Fortunately for us in the midst of these forty plus days are Sundays every week - those Sundays are to represent ‘little Easters.’ and that is why each week we have heard a resurrection story, a new life story, a discovering truth and abundance story. First it was Nicodemus who learns that “God so loves the world.” Then the Samaritan woman at the well is moved from outcast to disciple, from shamed to witness. Jesus brings sight to the blind man and today dry bones and Lazarus are raised from the dead.

Karoline Lewis writes “These are all resurrection stories. Jesus says to Martha, “I am the resurrection AND the life.” ... “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” The raising of Lazarus is not justification but salvation. Not proof but promise. Not evidence but experience.

Resurrection is not something you have to believe; not something just conveniently confessed; not that which can be comprehended. No, resurrection can only be experienced. Because when you experience resurrection, you start to feel resurrected. If you have not been resurrected, well, it’s awfully hard to believe that it’s true.”³

I got to thinking pretty hard when I was writing this sermon. I have come up with a lot of images for where we are at as congregations (this might apply a whole lot more to the United Church

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³ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4847>

folks right now but hopefully you will hear something as Anglicans as well). Perhaps we as Squamish United Church are like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, losing hope, grumbling and then glimpsing hope from time to time as we head towards the promised land. Perhaps we who have created a new dream, vision, building are even like Moses who never even got to step foot into the promised land. Or maybe we are in a holy Saturday time... the time between the death of what was... mourning the loss... forgetting the promise of resurrection and new life. A little less biblical but maybe we are like the seeds and bulbs that have been planted and we are waiting for the hope of spring so that we can sprout and bloom again one day. Perhaps we are Nicodemus wondering in the dark, or the woman at the well thirsty for new life, or the blind man longing to see, or Mary mourning a loss, or even Lazarus waiting in the grave, longing for resurrection and new life. Or tired; dry; some even dead bones laying in the valley not even aware there is hope anymore.

Simply longing, hoping for something new isn't enough. You have to experience resurrection from time to time. Most of us are here because we have. Most of us still come to this old institution of the church because we have glimpsed grace, we have experienced resurrection moments in the midst of the darkest of times. We have felt a peace beyond understanding, we have had a community offer us life when death was close at hand. But our human nature is such that we need to experience or witness resurrection again and again so that we will remain in hope.

“Simply to believe in the resurrection comes nowhere close to what resurrection means. Once you get it, you don't. Once you think you have it all figured out, you don't. Once you are sure in your confession, “Christ is risen,” you should stop and think. Really? Christ is risen? What makes me so sure?”⁴

The thing is faith is just that - faith. You don't have to get it all the time. When it comes to miracles and healing and resurrections if you completely understand you are way ahead of most of us. Faith, hope and grace are not about having it all figured out. God doesn't offer us new life, abundance and love once we've got it mastered. Just like the holy did for Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the blind man, the dry bones and Lazarus God will just appear as God's resurrected self offering us the resurrection promise as well. I truly believe God will show up, in fact God is already here and we don't, in fact can't do anything about it - except not accept it, ignore it, be unwilling to take him in. If our scripture stories are true then the promise is God will make certain that you know abundant life now, and not make you wait until you die. God will make sure that you have the opportunity to experience resurrected life here -- in this life. Yes even us United and Anglican folks are being offered new life.

“This is the heart of the story of Lazarus. Resurrection is not a confession. Resurrection is not a theory. Resurrection is not some sort of ambiguous promise. No, resurrection is real.

Resurrection is relationship with God. Resurrection is now.

This is the true miracle of this sign. We are so determined to say resurrection is... followed by something boringly theoretical. We are convinced that somehow, somehow the means of getting

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more people in the door is certainty of that which is inherently uncertain.”⁵ I gotta say that is likely one of the main reasons people leave the church, because we pretend to be certain and all-knowing of that which we don’t know, can’t fully comprehend or understand, we forget it is all about God and faith. All we got to do is show up.

Resurrection in this Lazarus story is simply the opportunity to have one more dinner with his beloved friend. Perhaps we might experience resurrection moments more often if we recognized new life can be found in a conversation with Jesus that transforms us. Resurrection is found when we discover God loves the world, when our experience of Christ changes us from a outcast to a witness of God’s love. Resurrection is found in the very dust of the earth, it is found when Jesus putts mud on your eyes so that you might see you are not just a ‘sinner’ you are a child of God. Lewis writes “resurrection is the experience of hearing your name being called to come out from the darkness of your tomb and then sharing a meal with Jesus, leaning against Jesus, your head on his shoulder, your cheek on his chest?”⁶ As we come closer and closer to Easter morning let me encourage you to ponder resurrection moments that have happened in your own life. As we wonder about ministry and vision and purpose for our congregations - remember the gift of God in the journey of the whole. Perhaps if we were to recognize that these faith stories about about us here and now we might have road to Emmaus experiences a little more often. At least I hope so. Don’t you? Enjoy the new-life being offered you this very day. You don’t have to work for it, create it, grind it out, God is here, can we see? Are we willing to let her spirit breath life-giving hope into us?

With Ezekiel let us pray Oh Dear God make these dry bones live!

Amen.

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