

Sermon, March 2, 2008, The Fourth Sunday in Lent
 Calvary Episcopal Church, Underhill, VT

Readings:

Ezekiel 37:1-4

Psalm 130

Romans 8: 6-11

John 11:1-45

The death of a loved one is one of the explanations on the “*top ten list of reasons why I left the church*,” which some folks can really hold on to; some stop believing in God entirely. I’m very aware at some funerals that more than one “death” has taken place, and there is little chance for an earthly resurrection for either the physically deceased or the now spiritually deceased that are left behind. Some will need time, some a very, very long time, before they can live again.

Today’s readings are an exercise in dealing with death. Ezekiel, son of Buzi a Zadokite priest, Ezekiel prophet to the exiles in Babylon from 593-571 B.C. tells us: “*The Lord took hold of me and, I was carried away by the Spirit of the Lord to a valley filled with bones...they covered the valley floor*” (vs. 1-2). Jesus told the disciples plainly that, “*Lazarus is dead*,” and not just sleeping (John 11: 14). And Paul brings it all together for us as he tells the Christians in Rome: “*To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace*” (Romans 8: 6).

We are getting closer to Jerusalem. Jesus has been dragging his early disciples, and us, toward the Holy City that we may all witness something special; something he has been giving us hints about. All the Sunday lessons from Epiphany through Lent have been something of a trial run for what we will witness when we arrive in Jerusalem. Things are going to get messy, mysterious, and confusing.

John’s is the only gospel that tells the story of Lazarus’ resurrection. John was certain to include this tale to give us another hint about what will happen in Jerusalem: *what Jesus does for Lazarus in Bethany, God will do for him in Jerusalem*. But its easy to get lost in the details of the story; the grieving sisters, the complacent, unworried, self-righteous four-day late savior, the stinking tomb, the walking corpse, Jesus’ “they just don’t get it Father,” prayer. The message in all this is that *there is power loose in the universe that is stronger than death, stronger than the fear of death*. The Spirit of this universal power calls us into life, even as we face death.

As Christians we believe Jesus has power to raise the dead; did you get that memo and email? We believe and profess, witness and proclaim that Jesus rose from the dead. But we often lack the stuff to really, really believe that, and certainly lack the courage to tell others. But that’s ok, ours is a failing caused by the mystery of it all. So John tells us the story in great physical detail (of the flesh) and in real time so it all seems less mysterious. In doing so, however, there lies the possibility of even greater confusion.

Jesus stayed outside the village, somewhere near Lazarus’ tomb. When Mary heard he was there, she ran to meet him and said, “*Lord, if only you had been here a four days ago my brother would not have died*” (vs. 30-32). Jesus became angry when he saw her weeping and the people wailing uncontrollably; they really didn’t get it. He wasn’t upset over Lazarus’ earthly death and he proved it by taking his sweet time in going to help. Jesus knew Lazarus didn’t need his help. Lazarus was now living in the lap of

eternal life. Jesus *was* going to help his sisters and friends, but became angered that they were giving him credit for the death, instead of Lazarus' new life. They wanted his old one back.

Jesus' anger did eventually turn to tears, but there's no mention that he was sad or distraught over Lazarus' death. Lazarus had left this world and gained his eternal life, something Jesus expected them to be rejoicing. But Lazarus' family, friends, and professional mourners were asking Jesus to bring their friend and brother back into this world for their own selfish reason: they loved him and missed him and wanted him back. And Jesus, they knew, had the power to do it. They had the power of Christ in their hearts but it was all-wrong. Of course Jesus wept!

We don't know what happens to Lazarus in his days following his resurrection. Perhaps Lazarus goes on to live a life in which he is freed from the fear of death, having been on the "other side." We do know, the religious authorities that wished to do away with Jesus because of his power over the people felt the same threat from Lazarus and plotted against him as well.

Lazarus' resurrection poses a very, very, important question for us all: when you die, do you fully expect that your next conscious experience will be hearing the voice of Jesus call you by name? Are we supposed to take this story about a man brought back to life in this world, and pray that God will do the same for us or a loved one; bring them back here? No. Instead we are supposed to unravel the story and let it go. We are left with the mystery of the story, perhaps the disbelief of it all, but time is running too short to stop here....Jerusalem and Jesus waits.

For certain, the true joys which we know as humans are in this world. But greater joy waits, on the "other side." Jesus wishes we at least try to believe so. I'd be doggone disappointed if my resurrection brought me back into this world, only to have to face its foibles, all over again? I'd be fairly upset with the person who prayed that prayer.

I've got some "fleshy" stuff to take care of yet in this world. And I will carry on here.

But, my soul waits for him, it will be called into new live, in his word (not this world) is my hope.

How 'bout yours?