

Topic: The Challenges of a Resurrection Faith

Subtopic: Having a resurrection hope amid the devastations of life

The Gospel today highlights the most spectacular miracle Jesus ever performed. And what is even more impressive is that there is nothing mythic or symbolic about how it is described. Instead, it is written from an eye-witness perspective that contains details expressing the raw emotions of grief along with questions and doubts common to anyone facing the harsh realities of death. Not only was the community surrounding Mary and Martha in tears, but Jesus himself was “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.”¹ The words in the original depict profound sorrow and sympathy mixed with indignant anger and displeasure² aimed toward the horrific consequences of the evil death represented. Commentators have suggested that Jesus “entered with vivid and intense human sympathy into all of death’s primary and secondary sorrows. Some have even suggested that He imagined in this one instance “the long procession of mourners in human history, with all the agony and hopelessness of it in thousands of millions of instances.”³ When Jesus encountered the sorrow of losing this friend who he dearly loved, he emotionally broke down and “wept.”⁴ James Liggett, an Episcopal priest in Texas known for his eloquence in preaching, expressed, “Those tears of Jesus sanctify every tear, and his distraught spirit makes holy our own grief, pain, and fear in the face of death.”⁵

¹ John 11:33

² Strong's Concordance, #1690, embrimaomai, to be moved with anger

³ Pulpit Commentary on John 11:33

⁴ John 11:35

⁵ Sermon that Works, 2023, by James Liggett

“When Ezekiel looked at those dry bones, and when Jesus stood at Lazarus’ tomb, they didn’t see death naturally blossoming into a new life;”⁶ they saw death in all its raw ugliness. Death is real and powerful. It hurts and destroys as it separates our souls, not only from our bodies but from our loved ones.

When Jesus meets with Martha and Mary individually in their grief, they express their disillusionment and disappointment by reminding Jesus, you’re too late; “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”⁷

Lazarus’ death was tragic. It wasn’t a “merciful release,” as we might say. It was not the kind of death that came to a person who was too sick, tired, and worn out to go any further. No! This was a death that came too soon to someone too young. To wonder about what might have been “if” circumstances were different is only human, especially when facing an abrupt, heart-breaking end to someone you love.

Amid their objections, Jesus revealed his love in many real and tangible ways as he carefully approached these grieving sisters. As Mary and Martha lay in the crucible of grief, Jesus was real, “He wept;” he was quiet and took their angry rebukes; he was supportive and remained available; he was deeply moved and stayed by her side. There were no big sermons, or attempts to correct their misunderstandings, or even a frown suggesting disapproval. Instead, he let their grief (and his own) run its course. Our Lord believed as we should, that we are healed of grief only when we express it to the full. Yet beneath their despair stirred a faith based on their knowledge of Jesus which

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ John 11:32

enabled them to hope against hope defying the evidence of what could be could be seen.

The prophet Ezekiel similarly spoke of things hoped for as he encouraged the Israelites who were taken into captivity in Babylon. When they despaired that they would ever return from exile, he promised that they, as a nation, would rise again. At the time, such a notion seemed utterly impossible and crazy. Yet history shows that eventually, their captivity ended, and the people were ransomed. Ezekiel was right.

During this season of lent, we are reminded that we can have hope even when facing crushing defeats, bitter disappointments, and severe loss, all because Jesus declared, “I am the resurrection and the life.” He did not merely speak about life; he embodied it. Therefore, the question Jesus asked Martha is applicable to us, “Do you believe this?”⁸

How is faith possible under such circumstances? It is a question many people ask in our post-enlightenment culture. I had dinner the other night with a friend who flatly denied having any faith. Then he said, “I admire you and your faith, but I can’t honestly say I have any.”

In response, I said that honesty about not having faith is the first step toward faith. Such honesty is where I began my own faith journey over fifty years ago. Jesus confirmed this principle in last’s week in Gospel when he said, “for judgment, I came into the world so that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.”⁹

When the Lord showed Exekiel a valley of dry bones and asked, “Son of man, can these bones live again?”¹⁰ Ezekiel

⁸ John 11:26

⁹ John 9:39

¹⁰ Ezekiel 37:3

replied, “Lord, you alone know the answer.”¹¹ It is a question many have asked as they face the “swift and varied changes of the world,”¹² as our opening Collect prayer expresses. It’s a way of asking about the possibility of new life in places where only dry, empty, lifelessness seems to exist. It’s a way of asking ourselves about the limits of our faith in the resurrection that God promises.

When faced with the dichotomy between belief in God and confusion about why God doesn’t seem to act in a way that we would hope or expect, we need to leave the door open to faith when disappointments confront us.

Indeed, from time to time, most of us feel like Ezekiel’s dry bones: limp, scattered, and drained of life and vitality. Yet, regardless of life’s setbacks, the words of that old negro spiritual, “*Dem Bones*,” written by James Weldon Johnson in the mid-19th century, still resonate in our spirits as we open our ears “to hear the word of the Lord.” Yes, the Lord is still connecting “dem bones” and making them live. Christ’s resurrection changes everything. Resurrection brings victories and opportunities where only failure and defeat once existed. Resurrection is at the very heart of the Gospel.

So, whether it is of ourselves, our families, our loved ones, or our church, we ask, “Can these bones live?” Let us respond with a victorious faith that acclaims: Yes, Lord, you have shown us that new life is at the heart of your plan for us. We believe you are “able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we can ask or think according to your power at work within us.”¹³ *Amen.*

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Collect for 5th Sunday in Lent. BCP p. 219

¹³ Ephesians 3:20