

Lent 5, 2011 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Easter's close now - two weeks away. But today's gospel reminds us that "we have to walk through a graveyard to get there." (Barbara Brown Taylor)

- It's an uncomfortable journey, made especially challenging because the stories of death that cascade from the biblical narrative over these two weeks confront us not only with the reality of our own death but also that of those who we love, not only of future deaths, but also the deaths of those we have already lost.
- It's an uncomfortable journey, and it gets more so - it reaches such a level of intensity in Holy Week that some of us will 'opt out', will bypass the escalating ugliness that leads to Good Friday and cut straight to Easter Day.
- It's an uncomfortable journey because it not only confronts us with death the "Big-D" but also with all the little deaths that happen to us throughout our lives - those moments and experiences when something passes away, something dies and leaves a void in our living - friends move away, or absent themselves from our social circle; serious illness captures us, or someone we love; a job, or a house is lost; divorce divides, anger alienates; the opinions and actions of others hurt us - all these are experiences of dying.

It's this sort of dying that Ezekiel refers to in today's Old Testament reading. The Israelites had been dragged away to captivity in Babylon - alienated from everything they knew and especially from the land God had given them - the Promised Land - they were desolate! That desolation must have seeped into their very bones. Some chose to adapt, to numb their sense of loss by denying they'd lost anything, by conforming and melding into Babylonian society. No matter the response, the underlying emotion was the same - devastation, loss, sorrow. It's in the face of that desolation, that sense of loss, that Ezekiel cried to God: "Can these bones live?" Meaning, "Can we live again, can we survive this loss?"

Our response to the death-dealing experiences of our lives can be the same as the Israelites - we can allow ourselves to be taken over and controlled by them, so that we, like them, end up living a 'dry bones' life. We try to numb the pain we feel in the face of the big and little losses of living by burying our feelings though buying things, or working harder, or reading more, by absenting ourselves physically or emotionally - or the opposite - anything to distract us. We try and deny our "Babylon", to turn away and pretend that everything's always "just fine thank you very much!" But no matter how hard we try it's still not our true home. And so, in the absence of being "at home" with ourselves, we opt instead for a sort of creeping spiritual death.

When the Hebrews were given their freedom by their Babylonian captors some of them just couldn't face the destruction they knew they'd face when they returned to Jerusalem. *The vision of a transformed life that the Temple epitomized, the dream of living in the Lord's presence was buried under piles and piles of coping mechanisms.* The corporate bones of the house of Israel were indeed very, very dry: their hope was dead.

God's response is a promise - the promise of divine breath that will transform them: "*I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.*" In the background, Jesus is crying for Lazarus to come forth and live.

And that, of course, is always the invitation of God to us: to "come forth, and live." To live not apart from the losses that make up our lives but through them - to really live, not just exist, to move with

purpose and intention along the pilgrims' way. So God's question to Ezekiel is also addressed to us: "can our 'bones' live?"

As a friend and fellow pastor once said to me: "Our job in life is not to arrive at death with our bodies preserved in perfect condition, but to slide in sideways, chocolates in one hand, and a martini in the other, having used ourselves up in living, with just enough energy to yell 'wow, what a ride!'"

Behind the humor is a real truth – a refusal to engage fully in life is pretty much the same thing as death! When we're not only open to the sacred encounter with God but also willing to be transformed by it we begin to experience resurrection, here and now.

In the gospel of John the fruit of resurrection - "eternal life" - doesn't primarily mean "unending life" but rather "authentic life" - life in all its fullness. We will have truly lived if we have allowed this encounter with God - and the new life it offers - to 'happen' in our lives Now. And when we allow it to be so then there flows from us a natural response, a giving back, a giving our all to the world as a response, so that when we arrive at the greatest moment of transition and change in our lives, when we come to our death's door, we will do so with our soul's engine running on fumes - and we'll say "Wow! What a ride!"

Yes, resurrection begins now – not in some future moment, and our job is to live that resurrection now, too – and to the utmost, to the fullest..

Easy to say, but in the face of death hard to practice! I'd be very surprised if there is a one of you who relishes the thought of dying. We may embrace the belief that Jesus has the power to raise us from death but we'd really rather he didn't have to practice on us! Rather, we'd like to avoid that experience and go straight into God's embrace without the dark transition.

The message contained in the hard story that is to come is that avoidance doesn't work - the road to Easter goes straight through Good Friday - and we know this. For God is continually working through the experiences of death rather than trying to help us find detours around them - creating new life in the midst of grief, creating growth out of those barren places in our lives, creating love in the midst of loss.

And the words of Jesus about Lazarus are words addressed to us, too - words of freedom in the face of bondage and death - words that cut away the bindings that prevent us from living life in its fullness - words with the power to lead us through the graveyard, and out the other side: "Arise." Arise from your heap of discarded dreams. Arise from all that is death-dealing in your living. Arise to discover that the Holy Spirit is breathing life back into you - back into us. Arise to live with magnificent hope! God is not done. Come forth and live. AMEN.