

Lent 5, April 2, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland, Nigel Taber-Hamilton
Ezekiel 37:1-14 John 11:1-45

It all starts out with bones and death. A valley of dry human bones, a dead man: both witness to that moment when we human beings become the most distant of distant outsiders. You can't be more outside of human existence than when you're dead. It's the ultimate reminder for the rest of us that our existence in the here-and-now is a limited, finite one.

But neither story is about the finality of death; rather death is simply an actor in a greater drama, which ends up with the craziness of dancing bones in the desert, and a stinkingly dead – really dead – Lazarus, walking out into God's good light.

For us, there's a temptation to see these stories as about a literal valley of dry bones millennia ago, and a very dead 1st Century friend of Jesus returning from the grave. Conveniently, neither of the stories – if heard that way – can have an impact on our daily lives, except in the most detached of ways. Of course, there are advantages to that! If we don't take them seriously as relevant to our lives we're not going to be challenged or changed by them. So let's take them seriously and ask: what's going on here?

Ezekiel's valley of the dry bones was a searingly contemporary metaphor for his own readers: it was about the fears and hopes of the nation of Judah. Would the nation, whose leadership was exiled in Babylon, ever rise again? Would Jerusalem, the city of God, be restored, or remain in ruins? Could those "bones" live?

That's a story that, for us, has contemporary freight; we have our own fears and hopes for our nation and our planet – and our Christian faith. In that regard, the connection between the craziness, the chaos, implied by the dry bones and our own time is strong.

Actually, no matter where you stand, chaos is an apt word to describe what's happening in the political and institutional life of this nation at the moment. The outsiders in our culture – the poor, homeless, immigrants – are not those who will do well in our current environment. "Will the nation as we've known it survive? Is the American spirit faltering as a result of unholy alliances and "America first" ideologies? Given our leaders' obliviousness to environmental issues, will our planet survive?" (Bruce Epperly). These are the sorts of questions that Ezekiel's metaphor speaks to. And clearly that boney metaphor's as effective today as it was during The Exile *in raising questions that are not far from everyone's consciousness*. Can our bones, our national identity, our legendary nation's compassion for others, live?

And then there's John's gospel. Our journey through Lent in the Gospel of John has been about insiders and outsiders, and how, with increasing certitude, the outsiders are the ones who understand Jesus, understand and embrace him and his passion for the things of God; the ones who, ultimately, become the witnesses to Jesus that formed the basis for the faith we share in common today.

What's striking our Lenten gospel passages is that with each passing week the outsiders are more

and more outside of what would have been considered the mainstream: a woman, a blind person, and, now, in Lazarus, a dead person. But not just – to paraphrase a “Monty Python” phrase, “lightly dead” – no! Four-days dead....stinkingly dead.

John hasn't just escalated the outsider nature of the main character, he's multiplied it: today's gospel has not one but three featured outsiders: a dead person and two women – a trinity of outsiders. We've met both women – Martha and Mary – before. Here comes Martha – ever the practical problem solver – who starts off with an accusatory rebuke: “If you could have just bothered to change your plans, then.....”! As the exchange continues, Jesus talks of resurrection, and Martha, challenged, fearful, dodges away. She's willing to accept resurrection as some abstract thing that happens far in the future but has no meaningful impact on her moment. In so believing, she's rejecting the possibility of a transformative experience that's accessible to her in the present – that's just too much for her. You can see how that attitude produced the “If you'd just have been here” comment: If Jesus had been there, she was saying, then a conversation about – let alone the act of – resurrection would have been entirely unnecessary.

Jesus' response is to say that his physical presence is *not* an irreplaceable component for a transformative encounter with God OR a transformative life of faith. Rather, it's the faith to which Jesus witnesses – faith in the continued presence of God's Spirit even when he, Jesus, is gone – its that faith which will continue to be transformative, to be a spiritual hub for believers – for us, now, in the present.

As the story plays out, Death the final arbiter of insider/outsider is not capable of exiling Lazarus into a dark, separated beyond; rather, through God, he's called back into the light – as Paul says – the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ – in God all things are possible.

BUT there is a cost for the resurrection that John describes: The cost is death. And again – just as with Ezekiel – if we see the story as only relating to Lazarus, some 2,000 years ago, we're missing the most powerful point of this story. Just as with Ezekiel, the story of Mary and Martha and Lazarus is rich in allusions, in metaphor. We all know about darkness and futility. In each of our lives such experiences are inevitable, and John lifts that up with both pungent and poignant accuracy; there are many little deaths on life's journey, and perhaps not a few big ones. Some of them we're called to bear because they lead us by the still waters where we will, if we understand what's happening, fear no evil.

Of course John is talking about the “big death,” but he's talking about the little ones, too. In particular, it seems to me, John's specifically talking of the death of old ways, the death of the familiar, the death of our previous identity, all of which are precursors to a life that can be lived in its fullness.

Not the least of those old ways that must die is the call from God for us to abandon ways of living that create outsiders and insiders. Instead, we're called to seek ways to live through the chaos of our present time and into a vision of possibility that permeates the story of Jesus: good news for the poor, release for captives, recovered sight for those who are blind – in what every

way they/we are blind – and freedom from what ever oppresses. (Luke 4:18).

The great Jesuit scholar of John's Gospel, Raymond E. Brown, once said that every generation must interpret for itself in its context the meaning of the biblical passages it encounters – and as a consequence seek ultimately to discern what really, finally matters: what is trustworthy? What should we allow to consume and fascinate, motivate and capture us. That's never more true than with this gospel passage.

In God, Jesus says, comes resurrection – new life – in all the ways it's possible to have new life. And then, The Question, addressed to Martha but really to all of us, too: “Do you believe this?” The word we use to translate the original Greek “pisteuo” is “believe” – but it completely fails to capture what Jesus is asking of Martha, and of us. “Pisteuo” is never just a cognitive matter. What Jesus asks is this: “Do you trust this truth I'm sharing with you? Do you rest your faith in this vision of new life in God? Do you live toward this transformative encounter with the Spirit?

Do you? And if you do, will you act on it for good?