

4th in Lent, March 9, 2008, (Farewell to June and Ed Moss), 2nd Baptist Church, Lincoln, Robert C. Molby, Interim Pastor

Encounter with Jesus – Lazarus: Death

Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45

Ezekiel 37:1-14, valley of dry bones;
John 11:1-45, the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

The Old Testament Reading for today is about the Valley of Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37. I cut out the reading in the interest of having more time for the sermon but I really like to have an O.T. reading and a Gospel Reading for Sunday worship. The O.T. reading usually is a warm-up for the Gospel Reading and today's Valley of Dry Bones is no exception.

Two things about that Valley of Dry Bones; two parallels with the Gospel reading; the first parallel is the fact that it was written when the Israelites were in captivity by the Babylonians. Ezekiel was in captivity with them and God gave him a message to give to them. The people in Jesus' day were under the Roman rule and so had to put up with foreigners having authority over them just as the Israelites were under foreign authority.

The second parallel is the message. God said to Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel knew better than to say to God that they could not because about the time he said that God couldn't do something he not only could but would! He said, "O Lord, you know." The message to the Israelites was that though they were as discouraged as they could be, right down to their very bones, God could put new life in them! In the Gospel reading Mary and Martha were grieved to the bone over the loss of their brother, Lazarus. Even Jesus, their good and loving friend, wept!

Jesus has been in Judea where his safety had been threatened. He had left and went over the border to Galilee with his disciples where authorities of the Temple could not go. The disciples were glad for this move because it made them feel a little safer. Meanwhile, back in Judea, Lazarus became ill and the two sisters sent a message to Jesus of that fact. "Lord, he whom you love is ill." First Jesus says, when he heard it, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." He stays two days longer in that place before he decides to go back to Judea. The disciples are not happy about this decision and try to reason with him. "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?"

We get kind of a strange answer from Jesus. He says, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble because the light is not in them." As I understand it Jesus is saying to them, "Let's go in the daylight while we can see; no need to try and sneak back during the night time. We don't have light that can give show us our path." I think the disciples were saying that if they had to go back why not at night and we won't be discovered. Jesus nixes that idea and he says, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him."

“Is that all you are going to do, Jesus,” say the disciples, “Why if he is asleep he will be all right. You don’t have to go back just to wake him up!”

Then Jesus tells them plainly that Lazarus is dead and that for their sake he was glad he was not there so that they could believe. “But, let us go,” he said. And Thomas, also called the Twin, one of the disciples, decides to lead the way. “Let us also go,” he said, “that we may die with him.” So off they go, all of them, crossing the border between Galilee and Judea to get to the home where Lazarus, Mary and Martha lived.

Upon their arrival Jesus first meets Martha, probably outside or near the edge of the village. It may also be near the place where Lazarus is buried. John emphasizes that Lazarus has been dead four days. Throughout this story John wants us to know this fact; Lazarus has been dead four days. That is to emphasize the magnitude of this story. In other stories of Jesus raising the dead to life they have just died. The raising of Jarius’ daughter back to life was immediate after her death. The restoring of life to the son of the widow of Nain was immediate after his death. It is possible to make the conjecture that these two had merely fallen into a coma and that Jesus revived them but here, in this story, Lazarus has been dead four days. His body has begun to decompose.

Upon their meeting Martha expresses her disappointment that Jesus had taken so long to get there. “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.” Jesus simply tells her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha expresses her faith in the doctrine of resurrection which some believed in that day and some did not. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection but the Sadducees did not. She says, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Then Jesus utters those famous words that we have heard so often at funerals and almost know by heart, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live; and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

What did Jesus mean by those words? Jesus had a deeper meaning as William Barclay puts it. “One thing is clear,” says Barclay, “Jesus was not thinking in terms of physical life; for, speaking physically, it is not true that the person who believes in him will never die. The Christian experiences physical death as any other person does.” Then he goes on to suggest that Jesus was thinking of the death of sin. “Even if a man is dead in sin, even if, through his sins, he has lost all that makes life worth calling life, I can make him alive again.” That Jesus can make someone alive again in this sense we know to be very true. A person can be so selfish that he/she is dead to the needs of others. One can be so insensitive that he/she is dead to the feelings of others. One can become dead to honor and respect because he/she becomes so involved in dishonesty and disloyalty. History has given witness to millions of such people who are spiritually dead coming alive again because they believe in Jesus. His touch has not lost its power and many of you here in this church today can testify to that fact.

There is another important truth here. Jesus was also thinking of the life to come. He brings to our attention that death is not the end. We think in terms of dying in this life. This is the land of the dying; the life we now live. We think in terms of traveling towards the sunset but we should think in terms of traveling towards the sunrise. In this life, in terms of our faith in Christ, we are not on our way to death but on our way to life!

“So, Martha,” says Jesus, “Do you believe this?” And then Martha makes the same confession that Peter makes in the other Gospels, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God; the one coming into the world.”

I want to ask, “Do YOU and I really believe this?” If we do we have entered into a new relationship with God. It means that we believe that God is who Jesus told us that he is, that he loves us very much and that he redeems us. There is no more fear of death. Furthermore, we enter into a new relationship with life. We accept Jesus’ way of life, his teachings, as the way to live. Life becomes a new thing and the end of life here on earth is not the end but only the beginning. When we stake everything we believe in Jesus we are truly resurrected. Our frustration in this life is ended. Frustration in this life is characteristic of a life that is laden with sin.

In the story of the Samaritan woman in Chapter 4 Jesus came to give her living water. In the story of the man born blind from birth Jesus gave him sight and now in this story of Lazarus Jesus gives him life. This is the supreme illustration of what Jesus can do; He gives life. Here is a paradox; the life Jesus gave to Lazarus brings about the end of his life in just a few days.

But God wants to give us life, life not only in eternity but life here and now; LIFE spelled in capital letters!

The story goes on as Martha goes back to the house and tells Mary that Jesus is here and wishes to speak with her. She tells Mary secretly so that she might go alone without all the mourners being around her. But when she leaves to go to Jesus those loyal friends who are mourning over the loss of Lazarus, thinking that she is going to the grave site to continue grieving over her brother, go with her. They want to keep her company in her grief. She comes to Jesus and speaks the same words that Martha spoke. Jesus is greatly moved in spirit as he hears her speak and sees all the grieving people around them. He too, weeps. The crowd says, “See how he loved him.”

If we had lived in John’s day these words would take on a deeper meaning. For us they simply convey that God enters into our grief over the loss of a loved one but for the majority of people in John’s day their god did not enter into one’s personal grief. To enter into grief means that your emotions have taken control over you. People in that day thought that their god would not be under the control of grief so thus, no emotion would be displayed. So John writes that Jesus wept. Our God does feel emotion. Jesus showed us a God whose heart is filled with anguish for the anguish of his people. Jesus shows us that we have a God who cares!

Then Jesus asks where they have laid Lazarus and they show him. Jesus commands that the stone be rolled away. Perhaps some think that he wants to look upon the face of Lazarus once more. Martha says the practical thing, “Lord, by this time the stench of death is on him for he has been in the tomb four days.” Here is that emphasis upon four days again. John wants us to know that Lazarus is really dead. There was a belief that the spirit of the dead hovered around the body for four days seeking an entrance again into the body. But after four days the face of the body would be so deteriorated that it could no longer be recognized.

Jesus tells her, “Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?” This is said not only for her benefit but also the disciples who have accompanied him. It is said also for the crowd of mourners who are present. So they roll away the stone and then Jesus prays. “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me. But I said this for the sake of the crowd which is standing around because I want them to believe that you sent me.” Then he gives a command in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” At once Lazarus comes out still in his grave clothes. Jesus tells them to set him free and let him go! At Jesus’ command even death cannot oppose him!

What a scene! Lazarus standing there in his grave wrappings! I cannot imagine the emotions of seeing a loved one come back to life. But, as we know, this was not a lasting resurrection because eventually Lazarus died again whereas the resurrection of Jesus was permanent. He did not die again but ascended unto heaven. His resurrection resulted in a living Savior! Jesus’ resurrection teaches us that eternal life is impervious to death.

Jesus did not do this miracle to glorify himself but to glorify God and to help all those who witnessed this event to believe in God. The Gospel reading for today ends with the verse that says many Jews did believe in him from this day on. But it also caused division among the religious leaders of the day. This raising of Lazarus was the final straw; those in power begin plotting for Jesus’ death. In John’s Gospel this is what brought about the crucifixion of Jesus on the Cross.

Next Sunday, being Palm Sunday, we will talk about Jesus entrance into Jerusalem and the fact that there was another parade that day on the other side of the city. Some of our young people who were out to MADD camp last summer will remember something about that. We will follow that with a Maundy Thursday service and the cantata “Song of the Shadows”. We will observe the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples. Then comes Easter Sunday; Resurrection Day! Let us go forth from here today to simply trust and obey!

Hymn # 349, Verses 1, 4, and 5; “Trust and Obey”