

The Resurrection Foreshadowed

John 11:38-44

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The Lenten texts this year have been laced with drama. Last week we had the Anointing of David; the previous week the Samaritan Woman at the Well; the week prior to that the Story of Nicodemus. The drama continues to build toward the climax: the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. Today, the Biblical writers offer us two glimpses of God's resurrection power. They add color and flavor and sound effects as the intensity mounts.

The Hebrew Prophet, Ezekiel, has a vision of a valley full of bones. The bones are very dry and very scattered. The question is: Can these bones live? Upon a first glance, the prophet is dubious. He says, 'O God! Only thou knowest!' To Ezekiel, it doesn't look too promising. The hip bones and the femurs and the ankle bones and the collar bones and the toe bones present a scene like Madison Avenue following a ticker tape parade. How could anyone put all those pieces of shredded newspaper back together again? God asks Ezekiel to imagine the bones coming to life again. God is asking Ezekiel to imagine resurrection!

At Trinity University in the 1960's, everyone wanted to take Anthropology with Dr. Givens. This hands-on professor was directing a dig of ancient ruins outside of San Antonio. He and his students had carted truck loads of bones back to the Anthropology lab on campus. They had spread them out over a huge surface like pieces of a 1000 piece jigsaw puzzle. Here and there a student had been lucky and managed to couple a wrist bone with an arm bone. But mostly, it was a sea of white skeletal remains.

None of the Anthropology majors could even imagine a whole skeleton coming together from that heap of bones. One day, a visiting professor strolled past the lab, glanced down at Dr. Given's valley of dry bones, and leaned over and paired two jaw bones together, a perfect match, an upper and a lower. All of a sudden, the students came to life! All of a sudden, they could now imagine bringing order out of chaos.

Ezekiel is shown a vision and is handed a question: Can these bones live? In other words, can you believe in resurrection? Do you believe God is able to breathe new life into old, tired bones? Do you believe that death does not have the last word? What Ezekiel sees is that with God all things are possible! Lent is the season for reflecting on these same questions. Do I believe in resurrection? Do I believe God is able to raise the dead? Do I believe that with God all things are possible?

The second Biblical passage is no less dramatic. Lazarus has been in his tomb for four days. The mourners are still gathered, still weeping, still grieving. Jesus takes Martha by the hand, walks to the tomb, and commands, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus, still wrapped in the burial cloths, comes out! Jesus speaks and the dead are raised. This scene is reminiscent of the Creation Story. God says, "Let there be light!" And there was light. God says, "Let there be life!" And there was life. Now we find Jesus speaking with that same, divine authority, "Lazarus, come out!" And a dead man breathes the breath of life once again!

How are we to understand this story? What are we to make of this pre-Easter resurrection story? The Raising of Lazarus can only be understood in the context of the conversation Jesus has with Martha, the sister of Lazarus, just prior to the miracle. Martha had sent word for Jesus to come because her brother was deathly ill. Jesus delayed his journey and arrived after Lazarus had died.

So, when he meets up with Martha, she is grieving deeply. Her brother is dead.

Though he weeps with her, showing his compassion, there is something else of far greater significance at stake. What Jesus wants more than anything is for Martha to believe in him. For it is in believing that she will tap into the abundance of eternal life. It is in believing that she will see the evidence of God's resurrection power. So, he engages her in a little conversation.

“Your brother will rise again.”

“I know he will rise in the resurrection on the last day.”

“I am the resurrection; those who believe in me,
even though they die, yet will they live.

Do you believe this?”

“Yes Lord, I believe you are the Messiah.”

“Show me where they buried your brother.”

Do you see the progression? First comes Martha's profession of faith. Then, she sees what only the eyes of faith can see, a sure sign of life made new.

Our western, Age of Reason, trained in scientific method minds resist the idea of belief prior to seeing the evidence. We want to first see the evidence, and THEN we will believe. The real hero of this story is neither Lazarus nor Jesus. It is Martha. She is the one who professes, “Yes, Lord, I believe.” And she is the one who then sees the miracle of life redeemed. That's just the way it is with our Christian faith. That is the sequence. First, we believe. Then, we see! Though this Gospel story has been named The Raising of Lazarus; it could just as well be named, Martha's Profession of Faith.

At my high school boarding school, we ate all our meals in the dining hall and attendance at meals was compulsory. We had assigned seats and the teacher at each table took attendance. It was a serious offence to miss a meal.

Occasionally, one of us would be missing, maybe still over in Northampton, and the dean of students, Archibald Hepworth, would read out loud the name of any missing student. And if a friend of that missing student would call out, 'he's in the kitchen' or 'he's in the men's room,' Mr. Hepworth would declare, "I want to see the body." Before he would believe any of us, he insisted on seeing the evidence first. Thus, Mr. Hepworth on such occasions was the antithesis of faith.

Right after this incident with Lazarus and Martha, Jesus heads directly toward Jerusalem. The plot to have him arrested and tried and crucified has been hatched already. The end is in sight. It is as if Jesus wants to be sure that somebody out there gets it! Eternal life, abundant life, new life, call it what you will; Life, with a capital L, begins with belief. Belief is the key that opens the door.

Before he dies on the cross, before his mission is accomplished, Jesus orchestrates this scene at the tomb with Martha and her brother. It would have been just as easy for Jesus to raise Lazarus from the dead, and then turn to Martha and ask, 'Do you believe?' But, no, he does it the other way around. Knowing that Martha gets it, knowing that Martha understands the connection between believing and seeing, Jesus can face his executioners with the greatest of hope. He has planted his seed in good soil!

To read the account of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection WITHOUT the faith of Martha is to see only a heinous crime, a good man cut down in his prime, a tragedy. To read the account of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection WITH the faith of Martha is to see the love of God in its fullest revelation.

Gone is the need to blame the Jews; gone is the need to pin it on the Romans; gone is the need to hate anybody for killing Jesus. Instead, there is only gratitude, gratitude for a God who chooses to love without holding anything back!

Lent is that season for pondering what it is we believe. It is that season for standing in Martha's shoes and hearing Jesus ask us, "Do you believe this?" For it is in believing that all things become possible. In the greatest of hope, Amen!