*Sermon from the 5th Sunday of Lent, Year A*

*28 March 2023*

*St. Matthew’s Riverdale; the Rev. Trent Pettit*

*Ezek 37:1-14; Ps 130; Rom 8:6-11; Jn 11:1-45*

My life is surrounded by death these days. Don’t be worried. I mean that conceptually, abstractly. I’m taking a class on Medical Ethics right now, where, amongst other things, we talk about end of life issues quite a bit. It also happens that my wife—Kira, you know her— is writing a dissertation on the theology of death in children’s literature. And, Dr. Radner (he’s not here this week so I can call him out) just had an article published on mortality, so he’s made it a point to make his students, me and Kira among them, to think faithfully about our mortality, too. So, basically, I’m surrounded by people who think about death. And, as a priest, I’ve been involved in thinking *about* and being *with* those who are dying a lot, too, at least more than before I was ordained. So, it has begun to strike me as odd that Christianity is often accused — even by Christians — of being in denial of death. I suppose some may have misapplied words like Paul’s in Romans, like those we heard this morning, words like “[we] are not in the flesh” but “in the Spirit” (Rm 8:9). Christianity is, apparently, not about the life of the flesh but, somehow, about another kind of life elsewhere.

This belief, that Christianity is death-denying—is contrasted starkly by Ezekiel’s prophetic address, which includes, essentially, a short course on human anatomy. Here, scattered, are so many skulls and bones—the signs of death—and then there is sinew, skin, and breath brought upon them. That the bones lie scattered shows us that what we are seeing is not a cemetery, but the remains of a massacre. These are the long-forgotten and drug-out remains of Israel’s exiled, those who died a shameful death. These *aren’t* the dead of “hallowed memory.” These are the bones of a people who have suffered a meaningless death in a land that was not their home. Though brought to life, death was their given fate.

Some might say that the story of Lazarus is finally not a story about death, but a story about life because Jesus calls Lazarus up from the grave. But, Lazarus isn’t completely resurrected. He’s only but resuscitated. He will die again. So, if we read the story as a story about getting out of death, we might get confused about what’s actually going on.

If we are still holding out that this story is finally about getting out of death alive, we might be stunned to see that when Jesus receives the message that Lazarus is sick he doesn’t leave straight away. He stalls! We’re told that he waits around for a couple of days before even beginning the journey toward Lazarus’ house. That journey, too, the disciples remind us, is one filled with mortal danger. Jesus’ way is fraught. I imagine that escapist Christianity exists because would-be disciples of Jesus want to avoid exactly this—joining Christ in his suffering and dying— and are, like the rest of our culture, ensnared by the fear of death and so struggle to affirm the goodness of life if it includes suffering. The disciples are, at first, just like this. As we see throughout the Gospels, they’re unable to come to terms with Jesus’ predictions of his death, and even protest his claim that he’s come to die. They are, consequently, tempted by violent political ways, much like we are, which is revealed most vividly to us when Peter, the fishermen (not someone too good with a sword) later tries to kill one of Jesus’ arresters when they come to get him in the Garden of Gethsemane. He, of course, only manages to nick an ear off, which Jesus heals, and then Jesus rebukes Peter. This fear of death is, indeed, a snare for would-be disciples of Jesus. And, this fear leads them to misunderstand Jesus and his Kingdom on the regular.

Maybe that is why the Scriptures hold death up so closely to our eyes. Even something as simple as perfume refers to the Cross. Death is certainly held close to us in Ezekiel’s vision and in the description of Lazarus’ smelly tomb. Amidst these images we see the end where all wonder, joy, pity, and fear meet. We do not construct our own lives. We are not eternal. And so, Christianity is not about getting out of death, but is focused on its defeat—the defeat of that more final death that renders death’s sting—the “death of sin” and the powers of hell. In our sin, we are “as good as dead,” and so, are unavailable to the Lord’s call. We are like those bones in Ezekiel’s vision; we are the ashes placed on our heads at the beginning of Lent.

Now, of course, Jesus does make it to Bethany and Lazarus’ tomb. By the time Jesus makes it though, Lazarus has been dead for four days and his family and friends are still grieving. Jesus seems to lack urgency in the story, confident, as he says, that “*This illness … is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.*” When Jesus finally arrives, both Mary and Martha, have their turn with Jesus. They are kinda mad at him and tell Jesus that if he had come sooner, Lazarus would be alive. Their faith is evident here, for sure. But, when Martha admits that she believes in the resurrection, she makes the mistake of thinking that Jesus agrees with her speculative hope in the *idea of* resurrection. But Jesus’ reply indicates that he is not interested in anything as abstract as “ideas.” He deals instead in the concrete. Jesus shows Martha not only *what* the resurrection is but *who* it is, saying: “*I am* the resurrection and the life…” The idea of resurrection stands in front of her, in the flesh and blood of Jesus.

Jesus does, indeed, bring Lazarus back to life, but Lazarus will die again. The miracle in view here is not Lazarus, but Jesus. Jesus is the resurrection. In our deaths, mortally and morally-speaking, we can make no claim to life. We can’t shout to God for mercy. But through the Lord, even for us who are dead in our trespasses, even for those in their graves, we are made available to him. The Lord, like those bones, can call us back to life, to personhood, to divine address, and to communion with him.

**The bones of E**zekiel’s vision are not initially named. They are a nameless, lost lot. Not until the Lord calls them back to life and their breath restored are the bones *named*. They are called “Israel.” God not only calls us back to life, but by name. Though these bones are forgotten and scattered, the Lord, Jesus, remembers them, remembers us, and calls us back to life to communion with him in person.

We see this in Mary’s message to Jesus. Mary doesn’t call Lazarus by his name, but as the one Jesus “*loves*.” So, Lazarus is introduced entirely in terms of his relationship to Jesus, as a recipient of his love and friendship. That’s resurrection. His body’s renewed bones show us the good for which those disgraced bones of Ezekiel are raised—to relationship with Jesus, the Lord of life. In other words, God has made us for communion, and even though we were lost, lost in our sin, we’ve been found by God.

“*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*.”

The resurrection and the life it promises is Jesus himself. In Ezekiel, it is God’s word which brings life to these bones. But, here in John, we see *that* Word made flesh, Jesus. So what we mean by resurrection is *participation* in Christ’s life.

This brings us back to Paul’s words, so easily misunderstood, in Romans. There, participation in Christ is contrasted with “life in the Spirit” and “life of the flesh.” Paul’s contrast isn’t between an ephemeral spirit and bodily life. The life of the Spirit is the life of the flesh animated by Christ. This is what Paul contrasts with “flesh,” a mind set on a flesh that is not Christ’s. The Spirit refers to the body of Christ, and the spirit that he breaths in us refers to his body—the Church. We are the people called forth from the dead by the power of God’s love, and given a person-ality, Christ’s, one that we share in diversely but is still Christ’s *one* life. And that sharing is life.

This, of course, means that our lives “in Christ” remain cruciform. The life that Jesus gives us to participate in takes on the very shape of his life. Jesus doesn’t stop being the crucified One after the resurrection. He is the eternal Lamb! And following him does mean, as the disciples worried, that we might be lead onto dangerous roads. But, because our lives are from him, however, we have been given a hope that is more powerful than the temptation to violence or the despair that the fear of death invokes.

Why? Because these dry bones live! These dry bones, enlivened by Jesus’ personal address, are those summoned by Jesus’ words to Lazarus: “Unbind him. Let him go.” We are the dead that Jesus calls “beloved,” and who he raises to share life in him.

Christ has gone before us all, so that we may look upon *his* death, and participate in *his* victory. It is this that frees us from the fear of death and from feeble hope before it. He is the one who makes us to stand, even amidst suffering and the threat of death, exactly because he has promised us a share in *his* death and so, *his* resurrected life.

It is not that we Christians deny death. Rather, we have been given the confidence to stand before the powers of sin and death and defy them; for Christ has already overcome the grave! So, let us believe in him, who *is the power* that’s defeated death and hell forever. He is the life and the resurrection. Let us share life with him.

Amen.