

Elizabeth L. Windsor, D.Min  
April 2, 2017  
The 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent  
Ezekiel 37:1:14  
Psalm 130  
Romans 8: 6-11  
John 11: 1-44

## **“Calling Down the Well”**

“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.” These are very familiar words –they are the words of grace that begin a Christian funeral, and they form the bedrock of the Church’s proclamation that for those who believe in Jesus Christ, there IS everlasting life.

Historically, the Christian Church has taught that the physical resurrection of the body will occur when Christ comes again. Physical bodies sleep in their graves until the Second Coming. But centuries of waiting for Christ to come again have caused many Christians to place our hope in a spiritual life that lives beyond the body in some way. Many of us – myself included – aren’t really sure what “life everlasting” really is, but whatever it is, it appears detached from our bodies.

The two passages of Scripture we heard this morning are clearly all about physical bodies –dead bodies - restored to life by the power of God. Ezekiel is the prophet of the Jews exiled in Babylon. The “dry bones” the Lord shows him are those of the dead who were the nation of Israel. Ezekiel is told to prophesy to the bones as if they can hear him– not once, but three times. The final time, the Lord God tells Ezekiel to say, “I am going to open your graves and bring you up from your graves. O my people; and I will put my spirit within you, on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act.” Re –creation of the sinews, flesh and skin, animated by God’s very breath reveals God’s glory.

John’s telling of the raising of Lazarus has the same intention. Throughout his long narrative, John underscores the purpose of

Lazarus' death; it is for the "glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified." Jesus "proves" he is the Son of God by raising a dead Lazarus from the grave. John makes it very clear that Lazarus is *really* dead. We are told he has been dead for four days – past the three day mark when some Jews of the time believed that the soul separated from the body on the third day. The stench of decaying flesh is ripe. Jesus calls Lazarus from the grave –and restores life to his physical body- prefiguring Jesus' death and resurrection which are shortly to follow.

John reveals both the divinity of Christ, and the humanity of Jesus. Lazarus is deeply loved by his sisters, Martha and Mary, the neighbors and friends who mourn with the sisters– and by Jesus as well. Jesus grieves. He appears to have failed his friends in a spectacular way by not arriving in time. Accompanied by friends and mourners, Martha goes out to meet Jesus and greets him with an accusation: "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." She states her faith in the traditional belief of the day that her brother will live again on "the last day." Jesus tells her that he is "the resurrection and the life and those who believe in him will never die." Martha believes him and in front of the gathered community, proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah. If the point of John's story is the revelation of God's glory made visible in Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, why doesn't Jesus call Lazarus out of the tomb after Martha's confession that Jesus is the Messiah, and end the story at verse 27?

There must be something else that John wants us to know– something that has to do with the relationships between Martha, Mary and Jesus and the love they share for each other and for Lazarus.

From the very beginning of the story, the sisters advocate for their brother. With sure confidence in God, they plead for the One they know embodies God's power to prevent death to save their brother. After Martha confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, she goes into the house after her sister. Mary is so let down by Jesus' failure to arrive in time; she does not go out to meet him. And when called by her sister to come to the Teacher, she, too, greets him with the

same accusation,” Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Blamed by both sisters and in the midst of his own grief, he weeps with Martha, Mary and the other mourners. And only then, does he have the stone rolled away and calls Lazarus’ body back to life – in the very last verse of the passage.

Praying over this passage this week, I was reminded of another story. Theophane, a Benedictine monk, wrote a collection of parables entitled “Tales of a Magic Monastery” in the early 1980s. There is a well at the Monastery where one calls down the things one wants most. Theophane tells of a young monk who was so badly hurt by his brother monks that he goes to the well and shouts down, “Solitude!” He gets his solitude, but then later realizes being a Christian requires others, and so he returns to the well and calls down, “Community!” The young monk is given community, but its demands and busy-ness drive him back to the well where he calls down “Death” – and his body dies. Death is lovely for awhile – quiet and peaceful, but then he begins to feel left out and unable to help others. The monk wants to return to the well, but his dead body cannot get him there, and even if it did, he has no breath to call again. The monk yearns for life, but watches as others pass him by and fail to see him. If only one of his brothers would go to the well for him . . . Theophane ends the story this way:

“It didn’t seem to occur to them to go to the well for me. They saw me lying there, but no one thought to bring me back to life. Why were they so selfish? So thoughtless?

At last someone did think of it. He went to the well and called down “Life for my brother!” I rose from the dead. Oh, to be alive again, to breathe, to see, to walk, to hear, to relate to people. But where was the man who raised me up? I asked everyone, ‘Have you seen the man that raised me from the dead?’ They thought I was crazy “no one comes back from the dead.’ ‘Called down the well for you? You call for yourself, not someone else.’ I searched all over. And you know, I passed many a grave before it finally occurred to me that someone else might be longing to return to life. I ran to the well, “Life for my brothers!” Ah, then I saw in the water way down there the face of the one who raised me from the dead.”

Martha and Mary have also called down the well “Life for our brother, Lazarus!” Isn’t that what underlies their accusation “If you had been here, my brother would not have died?” Supported by Martha and Mary and their community of friends, Jesus, too, calls: “Lazarus, come out.” And so he does. Lazarus’ body has been reanimated with the living breath of God – not only because Jesus has called for him, but also because his sisters and their community have done the same. It requires all 45 verses of John’s story to see the full face of Christ reflected in the living water of the well of life.

John – and Theophane, the Monk, issue a challenge to us: Where are the physical bodies that need to be brought back to life in our time? For whom will we call down the well?

Everywhere I looked this week, I saw physical bodies in community calling down the well for the lives of others; LGBTQ bodies, deported bodies, and bodies of the loved ones they leave behind, bodies addicted to opioids, black bodies, brown bodies, Water Protecting bodies, refugee bodies, women’s bodies, Muslim bodies, poor bodies, hungry bodies, bodies of the sick, the suffering and the grieving –some of them right here in our congregation.

The Christian faith is an embodied one - lived in community for the sake of others. What we do to the physical bodies of the least among us, we have done to the body of Christ. Scripture insists physical bodies matter, every bit as much as the spirit. The body of Christ is made whole when together we call down the well “Life for my brothers and sisters!” Amen.