

Sermon, 5 Lent A

John 11:1-45

Preached at St. Philip's, Brevard on Sunday, March 9, 2008 by RDF

Among the many reasons I'm glad to be an Episcopalian, I recently added another one: that we are unflinchingly honest about the reality of death.

I came to this conclusion after trying and — for the most part — failing to find some good, honest stories and illustrations on the subject for today's sermon. Here we are, in the Fifth Sunday in Lent, and death is the undeniable theme of the day: dry bones in Ezekiel, the deadliness of the flesh described by Paul in our second reading, and the resuscitation of a dead man in the Gospel. Not to mention the fact that we will hear about the crucifixion and death of Jesus next Sunday as well as on Good Friday. That's why we have the art work for the stations of the cross up on the walls, to help prepare us for what's coming next week.

In my search for honest illustrations on the subject, I ended up finding the best ones in our own tradition. There are lots of other names for a funeral floating around in church circles: some call it a "home-going," a "memorial service," a "celebration of life," etc. But in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, it's called "The Burial of the Dead." Our version of the last rites is officially known as "Ministration at the Time of Death." The heart of every burial service is the following prayer: "In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our brother, and we commit his body to the ground: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust" (BCP, p. 501). And during this prayer, the usual custom is for dirt to be scattered on the casket or the cremated ashes of the dead to be scattered, poured or placed in the ground. This prayer should sound familiar, since it contains some of the same language we use when we impose ashes on Ash Wednesday. When it comes to naming the reality of death, the Anglican tradition does not shy away from telling it like it is. And I admire that.

Most people who lived two thousand years ago could not help but be honest about death. They had not yet developed elaborate ways of avoiding the fact of human mortality, as we have. They knew that death was not only a common occurrence, but that it was also part of life. Before Lazarus dies, Jesus does not come right away after Mary and Martha send word to him. So when he finally shows up days later, they accost him with the words, "If you had been here, [our] brother would not have died." When Jesus asks for the stone to be rolled away from the tomb, Martha warns him that there will be a "stench" because Lazarus has been dead for four days.

Another reason I'm so committed to the Episcopal way is that we do not insist on an exclusively literalistic interpretation of every verse in the Bible. When I'm trying to find meaning in the story of Lazarus, it doesn't do me a lot of good to remain only with the literal sense of the story. When it comes to John's Gospel, we can even say that one thing we are invited not to do is interpret these stories in an exclusively literalistic way. In fact, individuals miss the point most often in John's Gospel when they think Jesus is speaking literally. Nicodemus misunderstands when he thinks that being "born again" means that he has to climb back into his mother's womb! In another story we heard this Lent, Jesus tells the Pharisees they may have been born with physical sight, but they are spiritually blind since they insist that they are without sin. And then there's the woman at the well. She has trouble understanding Jesus when she thinks the "living water" he offers her is something that will quench her physical thirst. Gradually, we come to see that the deep meaning of these stories lies in their spiritual and symbolic truths, rather than what happens just on the surface.

Thankfully, we are part of a Christian tradition that does not insist that only one kind of truth can be found in the Bible. We can also find symbolic and metaphorical truths in these rich and multi-faceted stories. The alternative can lead to sad and bizarre results. Years ago, when I lived in Hickory, there was a tragic car accident in an adjoining county. A teenager died as a result. It turns out that the teen and his family belonged to a fundamentalistic church which insisted on literal interpretation for everything in the Bible. After the accident, the pastor of this church began telling everyone in the congregation that if they simply had enough faith, God would raise the teenager from death to life. This went on for days — with no arrangements made — because the minister insisted that after sufficient prayer, the child would come back to life. He started an around-the-clock prayer vigil at the church to pray for this specific outcome. According to news reports, the distraught mother finally had to appeal to the minister to call off the vigil so that plans could be made to give her child a decent burial.

There is no doubt in my mind that God can bring life from death. That's the message of this story specifically, and, in general, it's the message of Lent and Easter. But a literal return of individuals from death is not something we experience. We know all too well that people sometimes get very sick and do not survive their illnesses. We know that many people live to old age, but that some people die much earlier. And we know that one of the few certainties in life (other than taxes!) is that one day, we all will die. One of the opening sentences in our Burial of the Dead says, "In the midst of life we are in death; from whom can we seek help? From you alone, O Lord" (BCP, p. 492).

Our problem is that we live in a culture which works very hard to deny the fact of our mortality. In his day, William Randolph Hearst was one of the richest men in America. At the age of 75, he forbid anyone to use the word "death" in his presence. The closest he came to an admission of his mortality came when he allowed control of his \$200 million publishing empire to be put into someone else's hands. The legal document which codified this arrangement contained a statement which said that Mr. Hearst had become "conscious of the uncertainties of life." Before his death in 1981, the writer William Saroyan spoke with admirable honesty when he said, "Everybody has got to die — but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case." Woody Allen, the comedian, spoke for many of us when he quipped, "It's not that I'm afraid to die; I just don't want to be there when it happens!"*

So what can we make of the story of Lazarus if we don't insist on interpreting it literally? This story reminds us that Jesus is the Son of the living God, the Lord of life. As he called Lazarus out of the tomb, he also calls us from death to new life. This story also can remind us that the thing we ought to fear most is not the death we die when we take our last earthly breath, but the spiritual death which is possible long before that moment. We can so easily become trapped in the dark tombs of our own making: the fears and anxieties which can make our spirits feel trapped and lifeless, like a dead person wrapped up in a burial shroud.

We, of all people, should come one day to have no fear of death. The pre-eminent symbol of our faith is the cross — an instrument of death — because through it, God brought salvation and new life into our world. Jesus comes to us who are trapped by fear and loss, and weeps with us in love. He insists that the heavy stones which weigh us down be taken away, and he calls to us in the darkness, where the stench of death clings so closely. "Come out," he yells, to Lazarus — and to you, to me, and to everyone else living in the tombs. Come out, says Jesus — out of the place where we cannot look death in the eye, out of the place where no light can penetrate our own shadows, out where the love of God can bring us back to the land of the living. In the midst of life, we are in death. But through the love of God and the saving work of Jesus Christ, new life is ours for the asking.

When John Owen, a great Puritan leader, lay on his deathbed, he dictated a letter to a friend. At first, he said in the letter, "I am still in the land of the living." But then Owen had a second thought. "Stop," he said to his secretary. "Change that and say, 'I am yet in the land of the dying, but I hope soon to be in the land of the living.'" In this life and in the next, that is our destiny as believers in the God of love: to move from the land of the dying to the land of the living.

I close this morning with a poetic prayer, written by Christina Rossetti. It's called "O Jesus" —

I have no wit, no words, no tears;
 My heart within me like a stone
 Is numbed too much for hopes or fears;
 Look right, look left, I dwell alone;
 I lift mine eyes, but dimmed with grief
 No everlasting hills I see;
 My life is in the falling leaf:
 O Jesus, quicken me.

My life is like a faded leaf,
 My harvest dwindled to a husk;
 Truly my life is void and brief
 And tedious in the barren dusk;
 My life is like a frozen thing,
 No bud nor greenness can I see:
 Yet rise it shall — the sap of Spring;
 O Jesus, rise in me.

*Quoted in You Can Stand Strong in the Face of Fear by Jon Johnston, 1990, SP Publications, p. 34.