

RAISED FROM THE DEAD

Sermon written by The Rev. Ralph W. Bayfield, D.Min. + 5 Lent, March 29, 2020 for Trinity Church, Martinsburg, W.VA., and Church of the Good Shepherd, Bluemont, VA

There is a bumper sticker that's going around, it says: BEAT THE CORONOVIRUS, LIVE LONG ENOUGH TO BE A PROBLEM TO YOUR CHILDREN! Seriously, the coronavirus is no laughing matter. Stay home! Wash your hands! Stay six feet away from people! But care for your children, there may come a day!

With the terrible coronavirus that is attacking the world; the huge numbers of deaths; the projections for future demises; the countless people who are ill; the shutdown of the nations of the world, including the United States, the three Biblical lessons in the Lectionary for today are most appropriate.

The Old Testament lesson from Ezekiel (37:1-14) is the classic story of the dry bones, and how the Lord, opened the graves. Ezekiel describes the same order that God used in the very creation of woman. God started with a bone, a rib of the man. In Ezekiel, Yahweh God started with the bones then put sinews on, and breathed new life into them. The Hebrew word is *ruach*, which is translated into English, *spirit*. It is noteworthy, the dry bones, even with sinews could do nothing, was not a person, until the Lord

breathed life, *ruach*, *spirit*, into them. The bones are an allegory for the nation Israel, which has been defeated by the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then the Persians and at the time of Jesus, the Romans. It is in that state of being defeated, carried into exile, that the prophets like Ezekiel were moved by God to proclaim hope and new life. We must note that in the Old Testament, it is the nation that is saved.

Chapter 8 of the Epistle of Paul to the *Romans* is a classic chapter about the Holy Spirit and human flesh. Paul writes, “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit that dwells in you.”¹ Having witnessed Jesus new life after the resurrection, Paul is describing a personal resurrection and new life which Jesus Christ is giving the new Christian converts and all of us.

The Resurrection is foreshadowed on this last Sunday in Lent through the raising of Lazarus- the last of the seven “signs” in the Gospel of John (cf 2:1-12; 4:43-54; 5:1-15; 6:1-15; 6:16-24, 9:1-12; ~~11:1-45~~). By bringing Lazarus back from the dead, Jesus glorifies God and sets in motion the events that will lead to his *Passion, his Crucifixion and Resurrection*.

¹ *The Holy Bible, NRSV, Romans; (8:6-11);* Nelson Pub., Nashville, TN 1989, pg.157-158

In the opening of the Gospel passage, Jesus receives a message from the two sisters Martha and Mary telling him that their brother Lazarus is ill. Although Lazarus and his sisters are close friends of Jesus, he delays going to be with them saying, “This illness does not lead to death, but is for the glory of God.”² When Jesus is finally ready to go to Bethany, his disciples try to stop him, reminding him of the previous attempts on his life in Judea.³

Jesus responds with a saying about the necessity of walking in the daylight (cf. John 8:12; 9:4-5). Jesus is the light of the world; thus those who follow him will not stumble in darkness. When Jesus goes on to say that he is going to awaken Lazarus, the disciples take this literally and insist if Lazarus is only sleeping, he will recover without the danger of Jesus going to Bethany.⁴ Jesus then moves from a metaphysical understanding to make his point literally by exclaiming: “Lazarus is dead.” Moreover Jesus is glad

² *ibid.* John 11:4, cf. John 9:3

³ *ibid.* John 11:8

⁴ *ibid.* John 11:12

he was not there to heal him, as his death provides an opportunity for faith.⁵

After two days, Jesus arrives in Bethany. He meets Martha who says, "If he had been here Lazarus would not have died. Martha still believes that Jesus can reverse this personal tragedy. She remarks, "Even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask."⁶

Jesus answers, "Your brother will rise again."⁷ Martha is thinking, Lazarus will rise in "resurrection on the last day,⁸ the traditional Jewish belief in a general resurrection at the end to the world. Our Lord Jesus Christ then answers that *he himself is the Resurrection*, and those who believe in him will never die!⁹

We heard in the Gospel reading this morning, how they rolled away the stone at the tomb. Jesus offered a prayer, so that they would know that he is sent by God to bring life from death. Jesus calls "Lazarus come out," Lazarus gets up, and they unbind him from his burial wrappings. Lazarus is a free man to resume his life.

⁵ *ibid* John 11:15

⁶ *ibid.* John 11:22

⁷ *ibid.* John 11:23

⁸ *ibid.* John 11:24

⁹ *ibid.* John 11:25-26

Lazarus will die again. He was raised from death, but this was not resurrection life. That could not be given until after Jesus himself is raised from his cross and burial to be followed by his Resurrection at Easter.

British theologian Helen Oppenheimer in her book, *The Hope of Heaven*¹⁰ writes of resurrection with its questions of body and soul.

“Christians are apt to suppose that the answer to their questions is a sturdy reaffirmation of immortal souls. But surely, Christians ought to put their hopes not in ‘souls,’ but in God. Instead of pinning our faith to immortality as a possession of ours, we trust, much more coherently, in the power and mercy of God. The Creator who made us can remake us without needing to salvage our broken fragments.”

I once had a dark period. When I questioned the Resurrection to my mentor and Rector, John O’Hear replied, “If there is no Resurrection, then its all a fraud!” I knew at that moment, God does not make frauds with no purpose. I believe in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, who gives all of us, you and me life.

We can trust that the same pattern manifested in Lazarus’ amazing story- of promised life after life- will be ours. AMEN

¹⁰ Oppenheimer, Helen, *The Hope of Heaven*; Cowley Publ., Cambridge, Mass., 1988; quoted from *Synthesis Year A, Lent 5*; Boyds, MD March 29, 2020 page 4

