

Sermon *What is the Purpose of Death*
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 3.22.26

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45
Psalm 130

I like talking about faith and metaphors. It's a great way to see and understand God working in our lives. For this Sunday, one of my favorite metaphors is Ezekiel's vision of the Valley of Dry Bones. God told his prophet to prophesy to the dry bones to come to life. They got flesh and muscle but had no life. God told Ezekiel to prophesy about breath – spirit – to enter. He did and the army came to life! It was a prophetic story for the Jewish people in captivity – they felt abandoned like dry bones in a battlefield in a war that they lost. Not so, says God, I am going to bring you back to life!

History shows us that they went into captivity and about 70 years later returned. The Jewish people since then have led with scientific and other discoveries that have blessed the families of the earth. In other words, Ezekiel's vision happened! It took a long time, and was a metaphor (there was no valley of dry bones that came back to life and became an army); but, it happened. This is the stuff I love to preach about. But, I am heading down a different path today.

On Monday, the paver who gave us a new parking lot and driveway came by. He asked what the Gospel lesson was for this Sunday. I told him it was about the raising of Lazareth from the dead. He said, "Oh, that's my favorite story." I asked him why. He thought about it and said, "If Jesus can bring that man back to life, certainly he can raise me to new life once I die." (I then wondered if she should preach on Sunday)

On Wednesday, my wife and I went to the West Coast Black Theater Troupe and watched the Gospel Review. It was amazing. Nearly two hours of Gospel music. It was so uplifting. Less than half-way through, the preacher said, "Now, let's talk about the raising of Lazarus." One of the cast members (playing as a member of the church) said, "Oh, that's my favorite Gospel lesson!"

Okay Lord, I'm listening; it's time to talk about Lazarus.

Let me start with this: I think it happened. I think that Lazarus died. Was dead for four days. Jesus then raised (resuscitated) him. If you think it's a metaphor; that's fine. Maybe it is. But for me, I think it's more than a teaching story, or parable; I believe it actually happened. But, for those who disagree, let's start there.

Those who believe it was not an actual raising of the dead but a symbolic, allegoric, metaphoric way of saying that the old body of sin has been raised to new life in participating with Christ and his Church; I agree. Yes, that is one way to look at it. And it's true. But, those who think it did not happen tend to say this: the story is found only in the Gospel of John, not the other three.

A true, factual story can happen even if it's just in one of the four Gospels. You don't have to have it mentioned in all four. Why then is that pivotal and "favorite" story only in John. Matthew/Mark/Luke are Galilean Gospels. They focus on events in that region (and that's most likely where their community is). John, however, is a Judean and Samaritan Gospel. It has stories from different regions (most likely that is where that community is).

Second, news stories tell you what you don't know about a story; not what you do know. There are popular stories (birth, wise men, resurrection) that are told and retold. Some of them made it into a Gospel or two. Perhaps the communities of Matthew/Mark/Luke knew about Lazarus – they talked with him and his sisters and heard that he was dead and is now alive. Mark, in particular, told stories that others made had forgotten about which is perhaps why he left out the birth and resurrection narratives. They knew Jesus as prophet and healer; he introduced the Savior as teacher and establisher of virtue and character.

Another way to look at it is this: Matthew/Mark/Luke were all written when Lazarus was still alive. There are stories of actual death threats against him from the religious authorities – some wanted him crucified next to Jesus. I think the three Gospel writers were protecting Lazarus. John's Gospel, some of which was written at the same time as the other three but completed in the next generation of believers, wrote this story after Lazarus finally passed.

Why do I think it factually occurred? I am interested in the writing of the early Church from the 1st, 2nd and 3rd centuries. They were fascinated by Lazarus's raising. Origen and Augustine drew spiritual meaning from it. I think they were writing from the side of so-and-so's mother was there when he died and then she had dinner with him a year later in Bethany. She told her son who now tells us that it is real. In the 1st century, there were people (more than who saw Jesus in his resurrected form) who knew Lazarus had died and then talked with him and shared a meal and listened to what he had to say about his friend Jesus the Savior. In the 2nd century, there were people who knew people who knew him. And then onward from there. Thus, Church leaders in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th centuries were writing metaphoric and spiritual meaning from an actual story (not the other way around).

In an attempt to look deeper at this favorite Gospel lesson of many, let me ask you a question: what is the purpose of death?

If you ask a biologist, the purpose of death is to help with evolution and reduce competition. A dead tree falls in the woods and creates nutrients for new life.

If you ask a philosopher, the purpose of death is for the living to appreciate the preciousness of every day. If life never ended, we would take for granted every living moment and it would then no longer really be living. Death, however, is the propellant that challenges and reminds us to live in each moment and embrace life.

What would happen then if you asked a theologian what the purpose of death is?

In our Book of Common prayer, there is a prayer that is said at every funeral/memorial that has Holy Communion. Called the proper preface, the only time it's used is for a memorial. Despite the scarcity of use, it tells us a lot about death. Here it is:

Through Jesus Christ our Lord; who rose victorious from the dead, and comforts us with the blessed hope of everlasting life. For to your faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended; and when our mortal body lies in death, there is prepared for us a dwelling place eternal in the heavens.

I've never preached on this passage and, unless you were listening really closely during a funeral mass, you may have missed it; yet, it is foundational in our understanding of what the purpose of death is according to the Church and according to Jesus.

Let's start with Jesus. The purpose of death for Jesus is, as stated above, *to rise victorious from the dead*. If he did not die he would not have risen in victory from the dead. Also, the purpose of death, according to Jesus, is to *comfort us with the blessed hope of everlasting life*. Wow, now that is saying something. Death, to Jesus, is a comfort to us. It brings the blessed hope of everlasting life. We know that this life is fleeting, it is not lasting. But, with Jesus, we are comforted, in death, of a blessed hope of everlasting life.

What is the purpose of death according to the Church? *For to your faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended; and when our mortal body lies in death, there is prepared for us a dwelling place eternal in the heavens*. The purpose of death is not an ending but life-changing presumably from one form into another. And (and this is a big "and") when (not if) our mortal body lies in death, there is prepared for us a dwelling place eternal in the heavens. Wow, now that is saying something! Death, and its purpose, is to prepare us for a dwelling place eternal in the heavens.

No wonder we call it Good News.

Although I like to preach about metaphors, this message has been about reality; about the purpose of death, and how the Church and Jesus see it. I do not believe the raising of Lazarus is a metaphor. I believe it happened. There is too much stuff written about him that talk about it as reality, as a fact. There were too many that went out to silence him and to keep him protected from those who want to silence him. But, the biggest reason why I believe Lazarus did actually, after four days dead, rise is because ultimately, I have the blessed hope of everlasting life. That the One who can raise me from the dead, and make it so that my life changes, and does not come to an end, is the One who raised Jesus from the dead. And he's the one who, not ever before or ever after, raised someone who was seen and declared dead, and buried and in a tomb for four days; yet, he came out, alive. This tells me that our blessed hope is that in death there is an entrance into the dwelling place eternal in the heavens prepared for us by the One who calls us each by name and the One who rose victorious from the dead and the One who raised Lazarus.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.