

Resurrection Hope A Problem We Cannot Solve

Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14

Romans 8:6-11 (Series A. 5th Sunday in Lent) Ps.130

John 11:1-45

Prayer:

When I was in grade school, I loved Mrs. Jan's film class, there is more to my joy of knowing, that I wouldn't be asked to answer questions, read aloud, I disliked because stammered badly as a young boy.

After the film is over, rather than Mrs. Jan rewinding the film, she would show the pictures in reverse. Things which had been destroyed, suddenly were reconstituted, buildings shaken to pieces by earthquakes took previous shape before our eyes, people who had been knocked to the ground suddenly sprang back to life.

That is what the lessons are about today -- God's power to run the film in reverse, to reverse the initiatives of infinitude, to overcome the gravity of life, to address a *problem in life which you and I cannot solve*.

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross, the high-priestess of death and dying, has wrote: "*So recognize the supreme secret: Death will one day take life from you.*" But that is not the problem to which these lessons are addressed. *Kubler Ross continues: "so while you are able, take the death from your life."*

Taking the death from your life that is the problem for most of us. Taking the death from our lives is easier said than done. The truth is, there are amply of self-help books on our shelves.

But has it ever occurred to us, that if any one of those books could really solve the problem, we would not need all of the *others which* surround them on the shelves. I do not mean that some of them are valueless. Many have helpful insights into how we live our lives.

Yet, whether it is a book describing the dynamics of co-dependence, addictive personalities, seven spiritual laws of success, or meditative techniques for managing stress -- regardless of how valuable these may be -- the old problem still lies just beneath the surface of our lives with its power to draw us back and **entomb** us in destructive behavior.

Like gravity, there is something in life which you and I simply cannot overcome, a problem we cannot solve. For some it reveals itself as despair following a major loss in life: a loved one, a sense of purpose.

For others it is being tied to a habit, an addiction, an obsession, a personal or broken relationship which continues to rob life of joy. What is more disturbing still, in most cases, people feel powerless to look for alternatives, actually preferring to die than risk change. Death in the midst of life.

For Israel it was her experience of exile. Jerusalem and its temple lay in destruction, its royal leadership wiped out, and its religious leadership taken with the rest of the common people into exile. They had lost virtually everything: land, livelihood, national identity.

In the metaphor of today's first lesson, their **bones** were dried up, their *hope* lost; they were *completely cut off*. They were a people *so dead* they were no longer sure they could even believe in God.

Yet among them was the prophet Ezekiel, who, after a series of oracles against Israel and the nations, describing how they brought themselves to this terrible situation, announces that God is about to address the *problem they cannot solve*.

God is about to take the death out of their lives, about to run the film of their lives in reverse, gathering parched and scattered bones, joining them one to another, overlaying them with sinew, muscle, and flesh.

And then, this is the promise from God: "*I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act.*"

And that is precisely what was to happen. This lesson is less about resurrection to eternal life than about resurrection in the midst of the graveyard we call life -- the death that gets up and walks along with us through life. It is about God taking death out of our lives. Believe me, I have seen many resurrections in my life.

Our gospel lesson makes the same point. Out of despair, Mary and Martha call Jesus to come and heal their brother, whose sickness has him on the verge of death. At first, Jesus does not respond, knowing that the miracle about to unfold is more profound than simply healing Lazarus.

When he does arrive, Lazarus has been dead four days. Martha, running to meet Jesus, angrily confronts him: *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* But anger quickly turns to pleading, to which Jesus replies *"Your brother will rise again."*

Martha, sharing the Pharisee's belief in an ultimate resurrection, fails to see what Jesus means, to which Jesus responds with the well known words: *"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."*

Does she believe it? Of course she does. But that does not solve her problem. She and her sister have lost, not only a beloved brother, but also their entire livelihood and security.

Martha's bereavement, and that of her sister and friends, the sense of helpless despair move Jesus as well. But he was more than moved, we read he was deeply disturbed in spirit. The words *"Jesus wept"* are too tasteless (*insipid*) for what the text really says.

These are not the tears shed over the loss of a friend. The word which describes Jesus' behavior, means *"to cry out,"* a spontaneous eruption deeper than mere tears.

But Jesus weeps, not because of his loss of Lazarus; he will soon do something about that. He cries out in rage at the **death** which covers all of life -- the gravity of life, the initiative of finitude, the problem which is beyond all our solving.

His is the rage of protest over slaughtered children in a school gymnasium, the mindlessness of internal conflict which erupts in ethnic cleansing, the tribal warfare that drives people to abandon ordination vows and take up defending their people by slaughtering their enemies, the grudges which continue to set one against another, the warped nature of things which reduces living to dried bones, and life to a graveyard.

Barely controlling his rage, Jesus orders the stone removed and commands that Lazarus come forth. And come forth he does, wrapped head to foot in the strips of burial cloth. "*Unbind him,*" says Jesus, "*and let him go!*"

Jesus had said "I am the resurrection and the life," not "I have power to raise you up on the Last Day." He is saying, "I am the one who can bring you to life now. I alone can solve the problem -- I can take the bit of death away from your life."

Martha had a faith in life beyond death, my guess is, most people do. But it was death in life which had her despair. The gift Jesus offered her and her sister, offered her brother, was not about the future, but about the present. This same gift he offers to you and to me.

Many years ago during the cold war era, a visiting professor from the University of Moscow arrived in Washington, D.C. He was interviewed by an American newspaper reporter and, among other things, he said that religion in Russia was practically dead.

"There is no one in the Churches" he said, "*except a few little old ladies.*" After seeing what happened to the Soviet Union over the past decades, I am sure the professor has reassessed the significance of those believing "*little old ladies.*"

As things have turned out, those *little old ladies* knew more about what's going on in this world than the people at the Kremlin or the University of Moscow. Lenin is gone, Stalin is gone, Gorbachev is gone, Boris is gone.

The "*little old ladies*" won. And I am convinced that what sustained them was their abiding **hope** that the transforming Resurrection Power of God was very much present in the world and in their lives.

My friends, the fact is that nothing -- no ism, no political system, no military power, nobody not even *covid-19*, and even death -- could ever defeat God's purposes; that absolutely nothing could set aside God's plan for humankind's ultimate fulfillment in the coming Kingdom of God.

In Leipzig, Germany, we heard the story of the peace movement of the 1990s. The pastor of the Nicolaikirche, a Lutheran Church in Leipzig, outlined the long journey of peace. It started, when young hippies with their dyed hair seeking a place of refuge and he offered to them in the church building.

It continued, through prayer groups of gray haired elderly citizens coming together with these young people and finding they had something that could unit them.... *The quest for peace.*

It led to growing congregations, in the sense of people congregating together to talk about and pray for peace. It spread beyond that Church to others and leapt across the iron curtain to West Germany.

On one occasion, the rumor was out that there would be arrests for demonstrating the people moved out from the sanctuary each carrying a lit candle and shielding it from the wind, showing that they *had no weapons*. It took long years of persistent prayers and led to a miracle.

The wall dividing Germany fell! The miracle of Jericho was reenacted for us. Out of lifeless dry bones came new life. This is the promise of God. Two of those young people who prayed for peace worshiped with us for three years with their family, two of their children were baptized in this congregation. We know them as Ulrike and Georg Schreckenbach. Here is a book about them

That is what these lessons are about -- God's power to spin us into new life. Jesus says cut him loose "*Unbind him, and let him go.*" These lessons are not just about the future, but about the present. They are about Jesus' power to unbind us and let us go -- freeing us from things which would **entomb** us.

The resurrection and life which God offers, he offers now: living water which never again will leave us thirsty for life, sight in a world which is otherwise blind to the ways God daily touches our lives, power to reverse the initiatives of finitude, power to love rather than destroy our enemies, power to forgive, even when we cannot forget.

That, and only that, can remove the death from our lives. In the midst of the never-ending struggle against death's reign in life, Jesus offers us himself, and promises that those who welcome him -- who make him Lord of life -- find the film running in reverse: resurrection from addiction, new life from deadly past.

It is not an invitation to do the *impossible* -- transcend a problem we cannot solve. Rather, speaking your name, speaking my name, he calls each and every one of us out of the caves which have entombed us, *them dry bones*.

Those who come forth at his command will discover the gift of his Spirit which not only reverses the powers of death, but which unbinds us, and gives us new life, new beginning in difficult circumstances.

Those who say "yes" to him, come spinning into life discovering it is not a problem to be solved after all, but a gift to be lived out of God's power and God's spirit. It is a promise of God and thanks be to God. Amen.

