

Sermon Lent 5 Year A, 2023 (All Saints'); John 11: 1-45

Realized Eschatology: Resurrection Here and Now

God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Open us, move in us, breathe in us your Spirit. Amen.

We are back on the road with Jesus, heading once again toward Jerusalem. We all know how this last journey into Jerusalem ends, but we are not there yet. Plenty more happens before we get to that final week and the cross. Remember that just prior to this episode today with Lazarus and Mary and Martha in Bethany, a small town just outside Jerusalem, Jesus had already been in Jerusalem, and had narrowly escaped not only being arrested but stoned to death by the Jews. He had told the Jews that “The Father and I are one,” and they picked up stones, saying “we are going to stone you...for blasphemy, because you though only a human being are making yourself God.” Now in today’s gospel Jesus has just heard that his friend Lazarus, who he loves, was ill. He waits two days and then plainly tells his disciples, “Lazarus is dead,” and then “Let us go to Judea again.” They must have thought he was out of his mind to go back there, saying “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” I can imagine the frustrated and exasperated Thomas saying “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” Of course Jesus had other things in mind, namely resurrecting Lazarus to life after four days of death, laying in a tomb, a cave, with a stone lying against it, and according to his sister Martha the stench of death would be appalling. Upon arriving in Bethany Jesus is greatly disturbed and deeply moved, and he begins to weep. Jesus weeps!, revealing once again his full humanity, and also the compassion of God’s Spirit within him. Then he cries out in a loud voice “Lazarus, come out!” And Lazarus does come out, bound up with cloth over his hands and feet and face. He returns to life. He is resurrected. Just imagine being a spectator at that scene, like the many people including the enemies of Jesus

who watched it, and who because of this very “sign,” as John puts it, would then double down on their determination to kill him. In the next paragraph of John’s gospel we hear the high priest Caiaphas saying “It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” So from that day on they planned to put him to death. It was a matter of political expedience that Jesus must die. Jesus’ resurrection of Lazarus was the final nail in his own coffin.

The resurrection of Lazarus anticipates Jesus’ own resurrection just a few weeks later. Ezekiel in our Hebrew Bible reading this morning was also talking about resurrection, so let’s take a look at this idea of resurrection and the belief in life after death. What did it mean to the Jews before Jesus, and what does it mean for us today? My thesis for our course on scripture for the first year of seminary was titled “The Development of the Belief of Life after Death and Resurrection in the Hebrew Bible.” What I found was that although this belief became foundational for Christianity as it developed through the centuries after Jesus’ death, there was very little in the Torah—which was Jesus’ scripture—about life after death, especially in the earlier scriptures. There were no strongly held cultural traditions in Israel before Jesus to suggest belief in resurrection of the dead. The idea of Sheol (Shee’Ohi) or in Greek Hades, the most commonly used word for the underworld in Hebrew scripture, implies at least some type of existence after death. However, in both Job and Ecclesiastes, life after death has no meaningful content, for “The dead know nothing...for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol.” (Eccl 9:5,10) According to N.T. Wright the concept of resurrection began as a metaphor for the return of the people of Israel from their exile in Babylon. Ezekiel’s metaphoric description of the “dry bones” which we heard today is not about individual dead people returning to life after death, but rather refers to the nation of Israel returning home, that being to its covenant with God. It is an image of Israel, then “dead” in Babylon, separated from their God and temple, being restored to its own land.

The God who breathed life into humanity at the Creation will do so again for the nation Israel. There are references to resurrection elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, including in Isaiah and the later book Daniel and other writings, but the hope there is not so much for resurrection of body but for the continued life of the soul, untouched by torment or death. I think that the essence of the development of thinking by the Hebrew Bible writers, at least those prior to the Babylonian captivity, is that the most important concern for humanity is this life, not the next, whatever that next life might look like. For the Israelites living then, the reward for a life of obedience to God was not eternal life in heaven, but rather to live to an old age, watch your children grow and flourish, and enjoy a good reputation. It was about the life they were living in the present, in the “now.” In summation, we do not know much about what the historical “pre-Easter” Jesus thought about resurrection of the dead and life after death, but the “post-Easter” Jesus that we see in John’s gospel and further developed by the evolving Christian community in the centuries that followed paints a different picture.

Enough of scripture for now, but before getting into what this all means for us here today, let me explore a little theology. [Hang in there with me!] The word eschatology refers to the study of the “last things,” or the end of the world, including the second coming of Christ, and the final judgment, or as we read at the end of Malachi “the great and terrible day of the Lord.” It has a lot to do with resurrection. St. Paul himself went to great lengths to convince the Corinthians that they would not experience the blessings of resurrection in this life, in essence saying that resurrection was a future event. It would not happen until the final day of judgment. Yet other New Testament texts including Colossians and Ephesians disagree with Paul, and say that we have already been raised in Christ, that we are raised into Christ at baptism. It is resurrection in this life. This idea is called “realized eschatology,” and it means that we don’t have to wait for our physical death, but can experience resurrection in our lives now. It is a

present reality. The eschatological events—those “end time” events mentioned in scripture—are not events that will occur at the conclusion of history but are events that are being carried out now **in** human history. Jesus often refers to this eschaton as “the kingdom of God,” and proclaims that it has “come near,” (Mk 1:15), and “For in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.” (Luke 17:21) It is here and now. And this means that resurrection is not something we wait for until after we are dead, but is available to us now in our current lives. Yes, it may refer to both now and to the hereafter, and I have no clue what the hereafter might look like in our lives as we continue them after our physical deaths, but I believe we miss the point—and we miss Jesus’ own teaching—if we fail to see resurrection as a present as well as future reality. Jesus says that he is the resurrection and the life, and as such he defeats death in the future and in the present, that being in our lives today.

So, what does this look like in our lives now? It is a return to our true home in God. It is a return to life as the Body of Christ. It is a return to the world as God created it and calls for us to make it. It is for resurrection of God’s dream for creation. It is to recognize that the world is not as it should be. It is to turn away from the painful death-dealing social realities of our world. It is to dream beyond the boundaries of this life we know and to imagine a world in which wholeness, well-being, health, and peace become realities. Today’s narrative the 5th Sunday of Lent about the resurrection of Lazarus invites us to consider the possibility of resurrection in the lives of all people who deeply need God’s presence here and now. Resurrection and life are central to our calling as the Body of Christ. It is an urgent call for us to consider the possibility that those in our world today who are socially, physically, spiritually, and emotionally dead might live into a new reality. It is a call to help resurrect the lives of people bound like Lazarus in the tombs of this life that keep us from experiencing the fullness of life that Jesus offers. It is Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream!” The ministry for us as the community of Christ is to nurture and strengthen and to provide for

one another until we are able to walk again, to remove the bindings of isolation, oppression, fear, and grief. In short, to be resurrected back to the home God desires for us all. Jesus' powerful announcement to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life," reminds us of our need to embrace Jesus as the resurrection and the life not only at the time of death, but also for all moments in life.

Becca Stevens is an Episcopal priest from Nashville, Tennessee. She is also a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, and now a tireless advocate for women survivors of abuse, homelessness and living on the streets, and sexual trafficking. She is the president of Thistle Farms, a network of over thirty global partners that now employ close to two thousand women, and raise money to house and provide for and seek justice for women all over the world. Becca was the guest speaker at our diocesan convention in Pensacola a few weeks ago. She and her community have resurrected the lives of thousands of people. In her book Practically Divine she uses the word "love" over and over again, and says that "love" is shorthand for her whole theology. "When I say 'love'," she says, "you can translate that into 'life with God.'" This "life with God" is life returned to home in God. It is resurrection. Listen to one of the stories she tells: Leigh was a girl abused as a child and raped in high school. She was kidnapped by a pimp in Memphis, who shaved her head and made her a prisoner. She felt like she'd never make it out what she called the "tunnel" she was trapped in— not unlike the "tomb" of Lazarus? But because of a friend she escaped her imprisonment and made her way to community at Thistle Farms. She now works along with so many other survivors to continue the type of care she received there. Somehow she made it through the "tunnel" she was in, and came out into the light. Leigh says the biggest difference for her is that, for the first time, she understood what love felt like. She says she had never felt love before, and feeling love was her saving grace. She now has the compassion for women still dying to do everything in their power to make it through one more day.

Have we not all experienced resurrection in our lives? Have we not all “died” to something and then been “resurrected” into something new, often with the help of a compassionate community? Who among us has not found a way to let go of something that separates us from God, and to then experience the love of Christ? And how appropriate for this Season of Lent: to find a way of letting go of one thing and taking on another: resurrection into new life.