

Ezekiel 37:1-14

¹The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." ⁴Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD." ⁷So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. ¹¹Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' ¹²Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I 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," says the LORD.

John 11:1-45

¹Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in

them." ¹¹After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹²The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." ²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet

bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

APPROACHING BATTLE

Last night I explained to the children that the Bible can be a tool for getting to know God better, but when I read stories like today's, about God bringing bones together to form bodies, and a dead man named Lazarus coming back from the grave, I'm wondering what trouble I might be getting myself into, not so much with the children with their parents; let's face it, when they start reading those stories, you'll be the first to field the questions, and I screen my calls. If you leave me a message, please be specific about the question your child is asking, so I can try to come up with an answer before I return the call. Or perhaps I'll call my supervisor who will not answer so that *she* can come up with an answer before calling *me* back.

The Bible is like a jigsaw puzzle in some ways; you need to start with the edge pieces – they're easier to fit together – then you go for the middle pieces. The problem is that there are about twenty million pieces to that jigsaw puzzle. Nearly two thousand years after it was compiled, there is still a lot about it that people don't agree on or just plain don't understand. Yet we Christians, particularly Protestant Christians, insist that it is God's word, our authority for faith and practice. So we're listening to God but we can't quite make out what he's saying. And so we have thousands of denominations who all agree that the Bible is the word of God but hear it in different ways. It's humbling, especially for a pastor who is saddled with the responsibility for making sense of it.

But I'm in good company, because I think that the writers of the Bible didn't always understand what they were writing. The author of the book of Revelation admits this in the first chapter, saying he is merely writing what he saw, and though it is possible that he was writing in a form of code that thousands of people over thousands of years have tried to decipher, I don't think he understood everything he was writing about. Today's gospel reading I believe is one account where the writer is recording what he observed without trying to explain everything. What impresses me is that he records Jesus' emotions in this passage. I want to focus on one question based upon one word used in verses 33 and 38. Both verses describe Jesus as being "disturbed." The King James Bible expresses it as "Jesus *groaned*." The Greek word suggests some anger; elsewhere in the New Testament the same word is translated as "admonished" or "spoke against." He doesn't

groan because he's moved by sadness; he's more irritated. So what got Jesus so riled up?

The passage also records that Jesus *wept*. I certainly believe Jesus felt sorrow for what he saw in Bethany – Mary and Martha and their guests mourning the death of Lazarus. It's only natural to mourn the death of someone who dies before they reach a ripe old age, and according to tradition Lazarus lived another thirty years after his resurrection – he was likely a rather young man. But I wonder if Jesus might have wept for another reason. After all, did the resurrection of Lazarus benefit Lazarus in any way? According to legend, Lazarus never smiled after he was resurrected because he saw in everyone the face of one who was perishing in hell, and it caused him great anguish – he did smile on one occasion; when he saw someone stealing a ceramic pot, and Lazarus quipped, "The clay is stealing the clay." But Lazarus might have preferred dying to coming back and being haunted by the memory of dying souls – after all, we can assume that if Jesus loved him and he loved Jesus that Lazarus was bound for eternity with God. When you read about folks who have had near-death experiences you'll find that one common point among those who trust in God is that those who almost died desired not to come back, that they were happier "going toward the light" than they were back here on terra firma. Whenever we hear stories of children or teens who die, our hearts ache and we say, "They're whole life was ahead of them," but what about the option? Don't we believe that they're in a better place? We can't know, but our faith tells us that they *are* in a better place. Our sadness is not for the dead but rather the survivors, for the family and friends who so miss the dearly departed. That's normal, and bringing the dead back to life might bring joy to the survivors, but what of the resurrected?

According to John, Jesus does not raise Lazarus out of pity for him or for his sisters. When news of Lazarus' illness reaches Jesus explains to his disciples that Lazarus has died in order that "the Son of Man will be glorified." He does it for his own glorification. And I know what some of you must be thinking; *that selfish Jesus. He doesn't care about Martha or Mary or Lazarus. He's just pulling off a miracle so that he'll be glorified!* I used to think that, until someone, in books or in person, made me look at the way the Gospel writer John uses that word "glorify." For example, in John 12:16 we read:

"His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him."

John 17:1 – “After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you’”

And verse 4: “I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.”

Finally, John 21:18-19 -

“Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.’ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.)”

Think about today’s Gospel passage in light of this definition of *glorify*. Jesus receives news that Lazarus is ill. He could go and heal him as he had healed so many others, and everyone would be happy and Jesus would continue to be celebrated as “the great physician.” But he waits until Lazarus has died, knowing that it takes more than a doctor to bring a four-day-old corpse back from the dead. And when news of that spread to the people in power, the people who exercise authority often by wielding the threat of death over their subjects would not be able to allow this. Jesus would have to die.

In fact if we read the next eight verses of today’s gospel reading we would come John 11:53 which reads...

“So from that day on (the Temple authorities) planned to put him to death.”

Bringing Lazarus back to life leads directly to Jesus’ own death.

And so now you see why Jesus groaned, why he agonized over the resurrection of Lazarus. It’s the human side of Jesus coming to grips with the imminent suffering he’s about to endure. Just as he agonized in Gethsemane he agonized in Bethany. It’s not the death that’s the hard part; rather it’s the suffering. Jesus has said already that those who wish to gain life must lose it, and those who surrender life will gain it. It’s the process Jesus will be going through on his way to death that is the struggle. It’s the *glorification* that’s the hard part. Jesus will be glorified not with a dozen roses but with a crown of thorns. The crowd will not break into applause but rather into the bloodthirsty chant, “Crucify him!” And he will be raised up not on an Olympic pedestal but on a crucifix.

Soldiers who have experienced combat will tell you that the hardest part of a battle is not the battle itself, but waiting for the battle. Jesus knows, when he resurrects Lazarus, that the battle is coming, the battle for our salvation, the battle for the will to take on the cross. He will agonize once again, on the eve of battle, in the Garden of Gethsemane. He will agonize over his imminent glorification.

Next Sunday we will celebrate Palm Sunday, the day that Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem while the crowd waved their palm branches and sang "Hosanna!" "Lord, Save us!" In twelve days he would be dying on a cross, but in three more days he would be resurrected. We too are resurrected to eternal life in Christ. His death conquered death for all time. During these last two weeks before Easter I urge you to meditate upon the gift Jesus brings us through his glorification that our lives may glorify him.