

RISING FROM THE DEAD (BEFORE EASTER)

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
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We have two stories today of rising from the dead, and it's not even Easter yet. The prophet Ezekiel, writing in the sixth century before Christ,ⁱ speaks in the name of God to dry bones in a valley and they take on sinew and flesh and come to life again.ⁱⁱ The gospel writer John tells us that Jesus called a dead man named Lazarus out of a tomb, where he'd been buried four days earlier, and Lazarus walked out wrapped in his burial cloths.ⁱⁱⁱ Biblical commentators are quick to explain that Ezekiel was reporting a vision, not an actual event, and that the story is symbolic of the Jewish people being in exile in Babylonia at the time, but with hopes of being reborn again by returning to their promised land in Judea.^{iv} As for John's story, none of the hundred plus scholars in the Jesus seminar considers it literally true that Jesus resuscitated a corpse. Some think there might have been an historical event, though, when Jesus revived a person whom others believed to be dead or released someone prematurely buried in a tomb. But the great majority feels that the story of Lazarus was created by the gospel writer John for theological reasons.^v

What could those theological reasons have been? The critical part of the gospel narrative, most scholars seem to agree, are these words: "Jesus said...I am the resurrection and the life."^{vi} The context here is Jesus' assuring Lazarus' sister Martha, "Your Brother will rise again." Martha responds with the common Jewish theology of her time: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." But Jesus, astonishingly to her, then makes the claim that he himself is the resurrection and the life.^{vii} What in the world does that mean? Jesus

explains that belief in him means both that one will live on after physical death (resurrection) and also that one will truly live during this earthly existence before one's physical death.^{viii} Martha makes clear that she believes in him as "the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."^{ix}

Jesus is quoted in the previous chapter of John as having said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."^x That wasn't said in relation to eternal life, but to living abundantly here and now on earth. In that passage he presents himself as the good shepherd, who cares for all his sheep, including the lost and the injured, the very young and the very old, the weak and the needy.^{xi} The images earlier in John are reminiscent of the Twenty-third Psalm, where God himself is represented as a shepherd who leads the living in right paths beside still waters, who prepares a table for people even in the presence of their enemies, who anoints heads with oil and provides that goodness and mercy shall be available all the days of our lives.^{xii}

The scholar who reflects on today's lectionary passage from John in the April 5 edition of *The Christian Century*, Karoline Lewis, who teaches biblical preaching at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, explains that some of the ancient manuscripts for the Gospel of John omit the words "and the life," leaving Jesus only promising future resurrection in the hereafter.

Presumably it seemed redundant to those scribes to have Jesus saying, "I am the resurrection and the life," when eternal life seemed to be the point. But Professor Lewis makes it clear that the whole idea of the Lazarus story is that this man is resuscitated for more years here on this earth, not for life eternal in a realm beyond this world. He will die a physical death again, but Jesus has brought him back for a while to experience present abundance -- to share food and fellowship with Jesus here and now, to get a better and fuller idea of "what life looks like, feels like, tastes like, smells like, and sounds like."^{xiii}

I feel that many Christians miss the main emphasis of Jesus' teachings when they dwell on what may happen in the afterlife. For Jesus came proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is coming on earth, as it exists in heaven. ("Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."^{xiv}). He used metaphors like a mustard seed that will grow into a large tree,^{xv} yeast that will induce bread to rise,^{xvi} and a hidden treasure that will produce great wealth.^{xvii} This Kingdom of God is already breaking into the world^{xviii} and is beginning to transform it in the direction of greater wholeness,^{xix} health,^{xx} peace,^{xxi} and justice.^{xxii} Highlighting the abundance and joy that Jesus brought into the world was his very first public act, as reported in the gospel of John: going to a wedding in Cana of Galilee and making sure there was enough wine for all the guests' enjoyment.^{xxiii} One of his last acts, as reported in all four gospels, was to accept the gift of costly ointment being poured over his head by a devoted woman.^{xxiv}

"Do to others as you would have them do to you,"^{xxv} he taught. "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."^{xxvi} "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged."^{xxvii} "Do not worry about your life...Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?"^{xxviii} "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."^{xxix} "Ask, and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you."^{xxx}

Sometimes I'm asked what the point of Christianity is when there are so many other compelling philosophies of life and psychologies of living available. In business language, what's the value-added of Christianity? Why should you bother coming to church on Sunday and listening to sermons like this? Why should you try to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, rather than someone else? Not, in my mind, because he allegedly was a miracle-worker. Not for some claims of supernatural power. Not even for rewards in some supposed afterlife. The value added

that Jesus brings is a radical vision of love that is available to us if we only embrace it, that is breaking into the world here and now if only we can see and feel it. It's a love that can transform not only our relationships with our neighbors ("love your neighbor as yourself"^{xxxii}) and with our friends ("No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends"^{xxxiii}) but also with our enemies ("Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you"^{xxxiii}...For if you love [only] those who love you, what reward do you have?"^{xxxiv}).

The historian of religion Huston Smith has written that although the kind of love Jesus brought had its roots in the Hebrew scriptures -- he was, after all, a Jewish teacher -- it turned out to be different in kind and new in quality as it developed and as it was lived out in the early Christian communities that began to stretch well beyond the Jewish world into the gentile populations of the Roman empire.^{xxxv} Jesus saw social barriers as an affront to his vision of love, so, in violation of social norms of his time, he shared meals with tax collectors, prostitutes, and outcasts.^{xxxvi} According to the apostle Paul, the new Christian communities were to be radically egalitarian: "There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."^{xxxvii} Jesus spoke out against injustice for the poor, and he condemned the hypocrisy of those who claimed to be pure and holy.^{xxxviii} He asked that people abide in his kind of love,^{xxxix} "so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."^{xl}

Catholic nun Joan Chittister reminds us in her book *In Search of Belief* that Jesus was willing to violate even one of the Ten Commandments to fulfill his vision of love. He cured people on the Sabbath, despite opposition from religious authorities. As Chittister writes, "Jesus required a higher standard. To Jesus, love trumped ritual." He said to a man who had been unable to walk for thirty-eight years, "Do you want to be made well?" When the man responded

affirmatively, Jesus said, "Stand up, take your mat, and walk," and "At once the man was made well." Now the religious authorities weren't only concerned about Jesus working on the Sabbath. They said to the healed man, "It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat."^{xli} As Chittister expands on the religious authorities' concerns, "We'll have no moral delinquency here, in other words. No curing people on Sabbaths who have been crippled for years. No carrying of pallets on days of rest. No weighing of one good against another. No departures from tradition. No patience with those who broke the law in the name of the lawgiver. No notion whatsoever that God's ways may not be our ways... What, in the face of such a strong religious tradition, is the answer: respect for institutional law and order, or recognition of the need for personal love...?"^{xlii}

Catholic priest Anthony de Mello wrote expansively about what Jesus meant in bringing abundance and joy, through love, to life here on earth: "Learn to enjoy the solid food of life. Good food, good wine, good water. Taste them. Lose your mind and come to your senses. That's good, healthy nourishment. The pleasures of the senses and the pleasures of the mind." De Mello is concerned about how modern people have become increasingly dependent on artificial stimulants and gadgets and don't seem to have any time to really savor life itself. "No time, no time, no time... They're overworked, go, go, go. [But] if you really enjoy life and the simple pleasures of the senses, you'd be amazed...." Instead, though, we're so often like people who have spent months planning a vacation, but when "they get to the spot, they're all anxious about their reservations for flying back... They're taking pictures all right, and later they'll show you pictures in an album, of places they never saw but only photographed. That's a symbol of modern life." De Mello counsels: "Slow down and taste and smell and hear, and let your senses

come alive. If you want a royal road to mysticism, sit down quietly and listen to all the sounds around you."^{xliii}

The prophet Ezekiel speaks to the dry bones in the valley so that they might come alive again in the here and now, not awaiting the general resurrection at the end of time, but coming back from Babylonian exile to the land of Israel in the near future. The modern Rabbi Harold Kushner tells of a line in the Talmud, the collected wisdom of the early rabbis: "In the world to come, each of us will be called to account for all the good things God put on earth which we refused to enjoy." Kushner comments: "No scorn, no disgust for the body and its appetites. Instead, a sense of reverence for the pleasures of life which God put here for our enjoyment, a way of seeing God in the world through the experience of pleasant moments. Like all gifts, of course, they can be misused, but then the fault is ours not God's." Kushner notes a similar attitude in a Roman Catholic convent he knows, which will accept a candidate for holy orders only if she "ate well, slept well, and laughed easily."^{xliv}

Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life." We'll talk about the resurrection in two weeks on Easter. But today the lesson is about trying to live within the Kingdom of God here on earth now. Jesus shows us how. Jesus weeps as he comes to Lazarus's tomb, in a passage I didn't read earlier. The people surrounding Jesus say, "See how he loved him." Yes, indeed. Jesus is all about love. And when he cries out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" I believe he's not just asking that Lazarus live a few more years upon this earth. He's asking that Lazarus live those years abundantly in his earthly existence. He's asking that Lazarus have fun at weddings and enjoy ointment being poured on his head. He's asking that Lazarus love his sister, Martha, his friends like Jesus, his neighbors who surround him, and ultimately those who hate him and curse him. He's asking Lazarus to be part of a beloved community that brings good

news to the poor, the disabled, the imprisoned, and the oppressed.^{xlv} Jesus is asking Lazarus to abide in Jesus' kind of love, "so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."^{xlvi} That's what Jesus is asking and promising each of us, too.

BENEDICTION

May the Love which overcomes all differences, which heals all wounds,
Which puts to flight all fears, which reconciles all who are separated,
Be in us and among us, now and always. AMEN.

Frederick E. Gillis

NOTES

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- ⁱ *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), vol. VI, p. 1088; *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 346.
- ⁱⁱ Ezekiel 37: 1-14
- ⁱⁱⁱ John 11: 17-27, 38-44.
- ^{iv} *Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 558; *Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 430.
- ^v Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), p. 439; Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 409.
- ^{vi} John 11:25.
- ^{vii} John 11:23-25.
- ^{viii} John 11: 25-26.
- ^{ix} John 11:27.
- ^x John 10:10.
- ^{xi} John 10: 1-18.
- ^{xii} Psalm 23: 1-3, 5-6.
- ^{xiii} Karoline Lewis, "Living by the Word," *Christian Century*, April 5, 2011, p. 22.
- ^{xiv} Matthew 6:10 (King James Version translation).
- ^{xv} Matthew 13: 31-32.
- ^{xvi} Matthew 13:33.
- ^{xvii} Matthew 13:44.
- ^{xviii} Luke 17:21.
- ^{xix} Luke 6:20, 7:28, 11: 17-18.
- ^{xx} Matthew 9:35; Luke 9: 2,11.
- ^{xxi} Luke 10:5; Matthew 5:9.
- ^{xxii} Matthew 5:10, 6:33, 13:43.
- ^{xxiii} John 2: 1-11.
- ^{xxiv} Matthew 26: 6-13; Mark 14: 3-9; John 12: 1-8.
- ^{xxv} Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31.
- ^{xxvi} Matthew 5:7.
- ^{xxvii} Matthew 7:1.
- ^{xxviii} Matthew 6: 25,27.
- ^{xxix} Matthew 11:28.
- ^{xxx} Matthew 7:7.
- ^{xxxi} Matthew 22:39; Luke 10:27.
- ^{xxxii} John 15:13.
- ^{xxxiii} Luke 6:27-28.
- ^{xxxiv} Matthew 5:46.
- ^{xxxv} Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), pp. 324, 335.
- ^{xxxvi} *Ibid.*, p. 322.
- ^{xxxvii} Galatians 3:28.

^{xxxviii} Ibid., p. 328.

^{xxxix} Ibid., p. 332.

^{xl} John 15:11.

^{xli} John 5: 2-18.

^{xlii} Joan Chittister, *In Search of Belief* (Ligouri, Missouri: Ligouri/Triumph, 2006), p. 65.

^{xliii} Anthony de Mellow, *Awareness* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 164-166.

^{xliv} Harold Kushner, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), p. 82.

^{xlv} Luke 4:18.

^{xlvi} John 15:11.