

LIVING AGAIN ON EARTH (NOT IN HEAVEN)
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
April 6, 2014

The story of Lazarus is often treated as a harbinger of the Easter story: Lazarus is raised from the dead, and then later Jesus is raised from the dead. But they are really quite different. As it says in the Apostles' Creed, dating back to the early days of the church,ⁱ "Jesus...was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father."ⁱⁱ Lazarus doesn't ascend into heaven, according to this morning's gospel lesson from John.ⁱⁱⁱ He comes out of a tomb, wrapped in a burial cloth, and he lives again as revived person, right here on earth. As a reference book I use, entitled *Who's Who in the Bible*, explains, "The raising of Lazarus is the miracle by Jesus which most strains modern credence."^{iv} But the result of the miracle is a resuscitated human being who will live on earth, die again, and be buried again sometime in the future. By contrast, when Jesus is raised, even before he ascends into heaven to sit on the right hand of the Father, he isn't a resuscitated human being, but a spiritual body, according to the Apostle Paul,^v who as we learn in gospel accounts, can appear and disappear to his disciples at will^{vi} and pass through shut and locked doors.^{vii}

Likewise, the Hebrew Bible reading from Ezekiel^{viii} has dry bones in a valley coming together when the prophet cries out, taking on sinews, flesh and skin and then coming to breathe, stand up and live as resuscitated human beings, in vast numbers. All of them will live on earth, not in heaven, die again, and be buried again sometime in the future. A crucial point made a bit later in the text is that these revived people, brought up out of their graves, will be

brought back to their own soil in the land of Israel.^{ix} Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel has explained that this visionary story from Ezekiel operates as a metaphor to give all generations, including our own, a sense of hope when we feel defeated and as good as dead. With a fuller spiritual sense in our earthly lives, we can be revived and live as transformed in the here and now.^x

As I explained from this pulpit several years ago when I preached on these two bible passages,^{xi} 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. (As we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."^{xii}). He used metaphors like a mustard seed that will grow into a large tree,^{xiii} yeast that will induce bread to rise,^{xiv} and a hidden treasure that will produce great wealth.^{xv} This Kingdom of God is already breaking into the world^{xvi} and is beginning to transform it in the direction of greater wholeness,^{xvii} health,^{xviii} peace,^{xix} and justice.^{xx} 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.^{xxi} 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.^{xxii}

"Do to others as you would have them do to you,"^{xxiii} he taught. "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."^{xxiv} "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged."^{xxv} "Do not worry about your life...Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?"^{xxvi} "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give

you rest."^{xxvii} "Ask, and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you."^{xxviii}

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 now, if we only embrace it, that is breaking into the world right here 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"^{xxix}) and with our friends ("No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends"^{xxx}) but also with our enemies ("Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you"^{xxxi}...For if you love [only] those who love you, what reward do you have?"^{xxxii}).

It's a love that also has a radical social vision attached to it, as biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan has explained: "I can imagine peasants all over Lower Galilee [in Jesus' time] who would have said...that Jesus brought life out of death and would not have been thinking of the heavenly future but the earthly present. Life out of death is how they would have understood the Kingdom of God, in which they began to take back control over their own bodies, their own hopes, and their own destinies."^{xxxiii} For Jesus taught "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."^{xxxiv} Jesus compared himself to the prophet Isaiah in saying that he was anointed to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the

captives, and let the oppressed go free.^{xxxv} Here and now, on earth. As Crossan puts it, "You cannot ignore the pointedly political overtones of the very term *Kingdom of God* itself... To remove...that which is radically subversive, socially revolutionary, and politically dangerous from Jesus' *actions* is to leave his life meaningless and his death inexplicable."^{xxxvi}

If you look a bit earlier in the gospel of John than our reading today, Jesus is quoted as having said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."^{xxxvii} 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.^{xxxviii} 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 their lives.^{xxxix}

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," as a professor at Luther Seminary in Minnesota, Karoline Lewis, puts it.^{xl}

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.^{xli} 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.^{xlii} 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."^{xliii} Jesus asked that people abide in his kind of love,^{xliv} "so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."^{xlv}

This joy is for all people, all of us here present today, and not just for those socially, politically, and economically oppressed. 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."^{xlvi}

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."^{xlvii}

The lesson of Lazarus is about trying to live again, anew, 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 sisters, Martha and Mary, 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 does bring good news to the poor, the imprisoned, and the oppressed.^{xlviii} 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."^{xlix} That's what Jesus is asking and promising each of us, too. Amen.

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

ⁱ "Apostles' Creed," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1978), p. 452.

ⁱⁱ *The Book of Common Prayer*, according to the use of the Episcopal Church (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), p. 120

ⁱⁱⁱ John 11: 17-27, 38-44.

^{iv} Peter Calvocoressi, *Who's Who in the Bible* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 108.

^v First Corinthians 15:44.

^{vi} Luke 24: 13-31.

^{vii} John 20: 19, 26.

^{viii} Ezekiel 37: 1-10.

^{ix} Ezekiel 37: 11-14.

^x *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), Vol. VI, p. 1504, citing Elie Wiesel, "Ezekiel," in *Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read the Jewish Bible*, ed. by David Rosenberg (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), p. 186.

^{xi} See Scotty McLennan, "Rising from the Dead (Before Easter)", a sermon preached in the Stanford Memorial Church on April 10, 2011, from which most of the rest of this sermon is adapted.

^{xii} Matthew 6:10 (King James Version translation).

^{xiii} Matthew 13: 31-32.

^{xiv} Matthew 13:33.

^{xv} Matthew 13:44.

^{xvi} Luke 17:21.

^{xvii} Luke 6:20, 7:28, 11: 17-18.

^{xviii} Matthew 9:35; Luke 9: 2,11.

^{xix} Luke 10:5; Matthew 5:9.

^{xx} Matthew 5:10, 6:33, 13:43.

^{xxi} John 2: 1-11.

-
- xxii Matthew 26: 6-13; Mark 14: 3-9; John 12: 1-8.
- xxiii Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31.
- xxiv Matthew 5:7.
- xxv Matthew 7:1.
- xxvi Matthew 6: 25,27.
- xxvii Matthew 11:28.
- xxviii Matthew 7:7.
- xxix Matthew 22:39; Luke 10:27.
- xxx John 15:13.
- xxxi Luke 6:27-28.
- xxxii Matthew 5:46.
- xxxiii John Dominick Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), p. 95.
- xxxiv Luke 6: 21.
- xxxv Luke 4:18.
- xxxvi Crossan, *Jesus*, p. 93.
- xxxvii John 10:10.
- xxxviii John 10: 1-18.
- xxxix Psalm 23: 1-3, 5-6.
- xl Karoline Lewis, "Living by the Word," *Christian Century*, April 5, 2011, p. 22.
- xli Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), pp. 324, 335.
- xlii *Ibid.*, p. 322.
- xliii Galatians 3:28.
- xliv *Ibid.*, p. 332.
- lv John 15:11.
- lvi Anthony de Mellow, *Awareness* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 164-166.
- lvii Harold Kushner, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), p. 82.
- lviii Luke 4:18.
- lix John 15:11.