

...and Christ's Life in and All Around Us—Fifth Sunday in Lent

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[Ezekiel 37:1-14](#)

[Romans 8:6-11](#)

[John 11:1-45](#)

There are so many instances and images of death and life in our lessons this morning, that it has made me sort of wonder: what—from the perspective of the Bible—what from the perspective of God, even is death?

Ezekiel, if you're wondering, was a prophet of God—a truth teller—during a time when Israel had been both crushed and deposed. Their image of themselves as being the invincible people of God was dashed. Their hopes were gone. And Ezekiel tells a story of God giving life to a valley of bones. Bodies that had laid dead so long they were just dry bones. If God so chooses, Ezekiel seems to say, God can put blood and sinew back onto bones. And God can also, therefore, do the more difficult task: of putting a new hope into God's people.

So, what is death to this God, that even dry bones are no challenge?

The story of Jesus and Lazarus and Mary and Martha has a similar feel. Mary and Martha are close with Jesus. Lazarus too. But Jesus stays away long enough that Lazarus dies. He's dead, his flesh is beginning to decompose. He's not a dry skeleton, like in Ezekiel, but he's dead.

Now Jesus in John's Gospel is showing signs. The water to wine at the wedding at Cana was his first sign. The man-born-blind from last week was another. And dead Lazarus is the last. What is death to this Jesus, to this God? Jesus calls out to Lazarus, just as Ezekiel is instructed to call out to the bones, and Lazarus emerges.

Death, at least as we seem to understand it, death as an irreversible decay of the cells and tissue of our bodies, death as the loss of our consciousness, death, like this, seems to be nothing to God. Death is like wine, or blindness, or just another part of creation to be used to show who God is.

But I often feel a lot like Mary and Martha, as they scold Jesus. If death is so casually ignored or defied by God in the Bible then why are we subject to it, why do we have to lose so much, grieve so much? Why do we fear it? Why, as a culture, do we avoid it, run from it, despise it?

I think our little lesson from St. Paul's letter to the Roman's is helpful. Death for St. Paul is something entirely different from just our bodies expiring. And life, therefore, too, is something very different that just our breathing. St. Paul writes, "But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness."

Now that needs some translation, sure. Paul says your body is already good as dead. Paul sometimes uses that word "flesh" to get his point across. Maybe just saying "meat" might be better. If you put *all* your stock in your body, what it can do for you, how strong it can be, how beautiful you can make it, even all the emotions our bodies let us feel, it's not bad, per se, it's just a bit of a... dead-end.

Bodies are not bad in and of themselves. How could they be, God chose to become a body, in Christ? God also chose to die a death as well. And that is the point here. Paul says that God becoming flesh, Christ coming and dying and rising, is showing us that we belong to something, our bodies belong to something that is more than just pleasure, something much larger, much bigger.

You'll notice of course, that no one in our lessons is talking about leaving bodies behind, and souls rising up to heaven. St. Paul instead says this: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you."

Now, death and life, according to Paul, no longer have anything to do with the labels that we normally use. Even though we are alive, our lungs breathing, our hearts beating, Paul is saying that we are dead if we do not have the Spirit of God in us. And even if we are dead, our mortal bodies expired, Paul says because of this Spirit we may yet live.

It doesn't make any rational sense at all. And that's also the point. As people of faith, as people of Scripture, we do not ascribe to the tyranny of rational sense. We can certainly use rational sense. We can make vaccines, and we can study climate science, and we can program computers and create elegant artificial intelligence and so forth and so on. But computers, like bodies, wear out.

As people of faith, we say with St. Paul we are part of something bigger. As people of faith, we can read the Gospel of John with a smile and say, yes, these stories are true. God can resuscitate Lazarus or a whole valley of dry bones because the God we believe in knows the names of all things, and can call them into life, because God made them all. We are part of something big which God has created.

And in Christ God shows us more, God focuses our attention directly on death. Death we always thought—death the people of God even once thought—was an enemy of God, the opposite of

life. But as St. Paul is explaining, in Christ God takes death too and makes it another way to express life. Paul says we are always in this real life, this eternal life. He writes, "But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you."

The only death we can die is to turn our backs on God's life, God's connectedness that dwells in all things. Our culture is the perfect poster child for turning your back on God's life. We are so focused on bodies and youth, fun and new shiny things, so focused on protecting ourselves and our families at all costs. When you look at this obsession with not-dying, you can't help but see all the oppression and the pollution and the suffering that it has caused. It is so ironic to see all the death that our fear of death has made. As Paul says: "To set the mind on the flesh is death but to set the mind on the **Spirit** is life and peace."

The eternal life and eternal peace that we believe in is not just a continuation of us. But we believe this eternal life is just that, eternal, ever-present, never-ending here, and now, soaked into all things. Just as Jesus Christ—the resurrection and the life—was present, in both his weeping with Mary and Martha, and present as he called the decomposing Lazarus out of the tomb.

We are irreversibly part of this life. We are baptized into it, and every week we eat it and drink it here. Our bodies are part of this life and, even our deaths, are part too.

Amen.