

Sermon

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St. John the Evangelist

4/2/17

Lent V: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

While two weeks from today we'll be all about The Resurrection (capital 'T', capital 'R') this week we're all about resurrections-lower case 'r'. Ezekiel's valley of the dry bones vision, Lazarus being called forth from the tomb, these presage the big Resurrection that is to come, they show us how God has power over death, the power to make a way out of no way, and to restore life to those who find themselves beyond hope.

I've never seen someone come back to life after being dead. But I've come close. When I was in college, a variety of health complications and conditions caused my mom to become very, very ill. It wasn't the kind of illness that has you in the ICU wondering if they're going to die, but it was the kind of illness that robbed you of all life, sapped you of all energy and left you unable to do almost anything. This was tragic in and of itself, but especially so given who my mom was—a lovely, lively woman of strong body, mind and spirit. A mothering legend, "Mama Van Niel" was known all over town for the generosity of heart that she possessed.

The general endocrine system failure she experienced required numerous appointments, continuous tinkering with medications and most of all, endless sitting around. She'd wake up in the morning, take her medicine, and then sit in a chair in her bedroom while its painful effects played out. Eventually she would have a small lunch, take another dose of medication, and sit in a chair in the living room all afternoon. Then it was time for dinner, back to the chair and then to bed. All day long she had to sit there as the world went on around her. There was no treatment but trial and error, hoping some combination of meds would allow the body's systems to recover and reverse themselves. Her immunity was compromised, her energy was gone, and happiness was hard to come by. She lost weight. She lost her career. She lost that sparkle in her eye. She was a shadow of the powerful, dynamic, fun, happy woman she was before. She continued in this state for *more than two years*. At our wedding I got about 30 seconds of a Mother-Son dance before she had to return to her seat. It was demoralizing for those who loved and depended on her and I can't even imagine what it was like to be her.

During those two years, when I would visit and spend time with her, I found myself asking again, and again, "can these bones live?" And the best I could do was say, "O Lord God, you know." That's about as much faith as I could muster. Would I get my mom back? I didn't know. There were some days I didn't think I would; that this would be her fate for the rest of her life. Such a lengthy illness tests the patience and faith of even the staunchest believer. The only person who never gave up hope was mom, even when she was at absolute zero. How? "O Lord God, you know."

After a couple years they hit upon a treatment plan that seemed to stabilize her enough that she could begin working to reclaim everything she had lost. Over the next year, through a triumph of will and spirit, with the unfailing love and support of my father and some key friends, my mother clawed her way up out of the valley of dry bones inch by inch. Literally. She would take one step further every day when she went outside for her walk. Initially just going to the front door and back. Then eventually down the drive way. Then eventually, after months, down to the end of the street. It was exhausting and painful, but like those bones down in the valley, who first got their sinews, then their flesh, then the skin and then,

most importantly, their breath, the Spirit of God within them, she was restored to life. It wasn't as quick or dramatic as Lazarus walking out of the tomb, but the effect was the same. Here was a woman many had given up for gone, coming back to life. And for that I say thanks be to God for there is no other way to explain such a restoration, in my mind. It is as close as I have come to witnessing a resurrection. Now you can catch her every Tuesday morning taking care of Vincent, chasing after him in the yard, and carrying his 35lbs up and down the stairs.

Many of you may have had, or are having, similar experiences with loved ones. Or you may have gone through or are going through something like this yourself. Whether it's cancer, a physical illness, a mental illness, an addiction, a loss, there are times in our life when we feel we are as close to death as we can come without actually dying. And in those moments we know of what the Psalmist speaks when they say, "Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord"—*De Profundis*, the Latin says—out of the profundity of my soul, from a place of death and dryness, a lifeless valley, I cry out "Lord Hear my voice."

But sometimes it is in those periods of darkness, as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, that we are able to glimpse a glimmer of the power of God to make life out of nothing. The strength of soul that it takes to climb back up from such depths of despair and weakness is a testament to the human spirit which is breathed into us all by our Creator. And there is nothing more incredible. These are awful, horrible, terrible, holy, moments in our lives. And it is from such moments of "little-r" resurrection that we can imagine the awesome power of The Resurrection.

This is important because not everyone comes back from a debilitating illness. People die; many of them too early and unjustly. And as inspiring as it is to see someone be restored to life after a long illness, it can be just as demoralizing to see that illness claim their earthly life. But what we learn from people who fill our hearts with wonder as they come back from near death is a lesson brought to its fulfillment in those who die. For the joy we take from those occasions of "little r" resurrection that we can witness, is exponentially increased in the power and the glory on offer from the "big R" Resurrection to which all of us look forward. What I learn from my mom's recovery is that as amazing as it was, the restoration to life that is promised to me, and to you, and eventually to her, is even greater. Experiences of miraculous healings don't diminish experiences of tragic deaths, they make them bearable. Because while God can make more life out of an *almost* death, He promises to make eternal life out of an actual death. This is the incredibly important distinction between the resurrections we hear about this morning (the dry bones, Lazarus) and The Resurrection we will celebrate on Easter. One leads to more life, the other leads to eternal life. And while more life is good, eternal life is even better.

When I called my mom to ask her whether I could share her story as a part of this sermon, I also asked her if there was anything she wanted people to know about what that experience was like for her. She thought about it for a while and then told me, "When I was ill, my body was reduced to nothing. And this necessitated me living in the Spirit. I had to learn how to rely on the power, the wisdom and the love of God. And once I did, I came to know that all that strength and power of God was still inside of me. That's what got me through. If I could feel that, it didn't matter as much if I died because it was a comfortable place to be." What my mom discovered in the midst of her illness is the part of us that never dies—that presence of the wisdom, the power and the love of God in each of us.

If you have a loved one whose illness ended in death, not the extra years of life you wished for, take heart in that presence. The promise of our faith that, as St. Paul says to the Romans this morning, "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." What they are experiencing is a

life so much larger, so much more glorious and so much more wondrous than anything we know, it can serve as some comfort to us in our pain and grief. And when we are blessed enough to witness a person restored to life from a place of nothingness it is cause to celebrate not just because that person has been healed, but because that is a foretaste of what is to come. That is the greatest gift of my mother's recovery. She is a walking miracle whose very presence heralds even more wonderful miracles for us all. The strength of spirit that inspires us, the power of hope to never die, the glory of a life restored, these are the things that Resurrection is made of. These are the things that get us through the valley. These are the things that are promised to us in paradise. This is the substance of our Christian hope. That no matter what, death will not have the final word, that life goes on, and through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ we reign victorious o'er the grave.