

The Resurrection and the Life

April 10, 2011

Ezekiel 37:1-14 Psalm 130 John 11:1-45

So. Lazarus. Friend of Jesus. Brother of Mary and Martha. And he dies. And then Jesus, who has taken his time about getting there, calls him back from the dead.

And what we don't see in the reading we had today is that, in the Gospel of John, this is what precipitates the chief priests and Pharisees setting out to kill Jesus. "“What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.” (John 11:47-48) In other words, Jesus' bringing Lazarus back to life is the culmination of his ministry, in this Gospel, and the beginning of the end. A fitting reading, then, for the last Sunday in Lent. For next week is Palm Sunday.

And as the culmination of Jesus' ministry, this story has many things to tell us. I'm going to talk about two of them: what it means when Jesus says he is both resurrection and life; and the call on Lazarus's friends—and us—to unbind him.

Did you catch that line that Ernie read (the one we're likely to hear at funerals)?

I am the resurrection and the life. [Jesus said.] Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

I understand that some early scholars thought that Jesus could have left out *life*, thinking that it was redundant to add it to *resurrection*. That's true, if you understand Jesus to be saying, "I am the resurrection and the eternal life." But that's not what Jesus says here. They're not the same thing.

"I am the resurrection." It is through Jesus the Christ that we have faith that death is not the end for us, that through Christ and with Christ we will live on eternally.

"I am the life," Jesus says as well. Life! Life as opposed to mere existence. Life with meaning, not just slogging through the days. Life without fear of death. Life in God's love now and not just after death.

We sometimes forget this part. And honestly, sometimes Christians haven't taught this part. When I was in seminary and reading African-American theologians, I realized that historically Blacks in this country were taught a form of Christianity in which all the good stuff was to come after death. This life, with slavery and Jim Crow and lynchings, was a "vale of tears," but the life to come, *ah*, that's where the rewards would come. Of course, if you think about it, slave owners could hardly teach their chattel that Jesus came to bring life now, could they?

That's not the only form of Christianity that has emphasized the life to come over the life now. Sometimes we have gotten completely dominated by the rules of Christian morality, so that we try to avoid anything that might be considered sinful (drinking, playing cards, dancing ... women wearing pants, children laughing on Sundays). Some forms of Christianity have taught that life is risky, because there's always something you might do that would get you kicked out of heaven, so you better toe the line.

That leads to the reputation that Christians get sometimes? It's the one that makes people, when they meet me and find out I'm a minister, get flustered and back away and start apologizing for whatever it was that they just said, or thought, or didn't think ... It's the reputation of Christians as being holier-than-thou, pious, self-righteous, hypocritical, judgmental prigs. And nobody wants to hang around with folks like that.

But real Christians, living-God's-eternal-life-now Christians, they draw people to them. People want to hang around with them because they're filled with joy, their cups run over the top with love. They can celebrate and have fun ... but not at the expense of others or in ways that hurt others. Their lives reach out to include and love as many people as possible ... they do not live in fear of not having as much as the next person or being as "good" as the next person, the fear that there won't be enough and they need to gather all they can in case someone else might get it first ... because their lives are filled with the Life that is Christ Jesus. Eternal life, starting here, starting now.

It's one of the reasons that we tend to like hanging out with the folks here at church. Why we have potlucks so we can sit around and talk. Because the folks here are fun people to be with. Good people. Real people. Salt-of-the-earth, give-my-life-a-little zest people.

This is not to say that we're all walking around with giddy smiles on our faces all the time. (You know *that's* not true.) Fear does overtake us at times, and grief and anxiety and depression. But we have Christ-the-Life in our lives, and fear does not need to win.

“I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus says. Sometimes he has to remind us of that. Sometimes emphatically. Because we get stuck in caves of fear, and instead of living we are merely existing. And then Jesus calls us, as he called to his friend: “Lazarus, come out!” He shouts it. He means it. He doesn’t want us living as if we were already dead. “Christian, come out!”

And then we stumble forth, wanting to believe, wanting to LIVE. But still wrapped in those binding grave cloths. And then Jesus calls on our friends, on our fellow members of the body of Christ: “Unbind him, and let him go,” he said to Lazarus’s friends. “Unbind him. Unbind her,” he says to us.

Jesus did not say, “Okay, Lazarus, now I’ve brought you back to life, time to unbind those wrappings and get to it.” No, this was a role for his community.

Just as it is a role for us, as a community of Christians, to unbind those who Jesus has called from lives of existence, lives lived in caves of fear ... or of addiction or illiteracy or mental illness or poverty or unbelief. We live in a culture that says folks ought to be able to take care of themselves, pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, but Jesus says to us: “Unbind him. Unbind her.”

It’s what the pastoral deacons do when they visit with folks who are ill or struggling, whose lives have gotten wrapped up in fear and despair. They seek to unbind them.

It’s what we do with the food pantry or with One Great Hour of Sharing or with the Gifts of the Heart kits, for folks whose lives are strangled with hunger and chaos. We seek to unbind them.

And sometimes it's what we do personally. I was thinking of all the people whose lives have gotten stuck, somehow, and we've grown to expect certain things from them. Think of your family—is there someone who's always the one to boss people around, or the one to make people laugh, or the one to goof up and need to be rescued? What happens when God calls them to grow, to live in a different way? They need the family to unbind them from those expectations, or they will never be able to grow into their new lives.

Or in a relationship between a husband and wife. I heard someone say a long time ago that in any relationship, "the rocks in his head fit the holes in hers." What happens when God calls him to grow, to live in a different way? Those rocks and holes don't fit together so well ... and she needs to unbind him from the expectations that his life must look exactly like it did when they first met.

"I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus says. The life to live fully, deeply, joyfully. The life to invite others into, to unbind them into.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.