



“Come Out and Live!”

Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:3-7, 17, 20-27, 33b-45

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Fifth Sunday in Lent

I enjoy movies, but have a tendency to get distracted and not go to see them. Seven years ago, however, there was a film, “A Beautiful Mind,” that I felt compelled to go see. The film is based on the life of Nobel Prize winning mathematician John Nash. I found it captivating; it may avoid some of the unpleasant details of Nash’s life, but that doesn’t take away from the power of the story. “A Beautiful Mind” is taken captive by mental illness and we see a brilliant and forceful personality dragged down into helplessness. It touches the heart to see Nash’s wife Alicia seek to understand and to help her husband – and to feel her own sense of helplessness as the story unfolds. Finally, John confronts his illness in the only way he knows how – as a mathematical problem to be solved. If a theorem can be figured out, so can this, and he sets about solving it, slowly, painfully, through sheer will, and with a wry, and often caustic, wit. There is no question that he is marked by his illness, the affect of one with a neurological disorder is clearly evident, but he is back in his world, teaching and living life with his wife and son.

For some odd reason I see parallels between the Scriptures we read today and that film. Ezekiel is called to prophesy over a valley of dry bones, but they’re really living. Jesus comes to the side of his sick friend who dies while he’s on the way to him. These are scenes of helplessness and hopelessness. Such scenes, however, are not confined only to the Bible. Seven years ago all of us watched, helpless, powerless, as the television cameras replayed the seemingly lazy flight of those two airliners into the World Trade Center. A sight that was all-too close and all-too-real for many of you sitting here today. When I have seen those images replayed on the succeeding anniversaries and in various documentaries, I still feel the same frustration and helplessness. Our news broadcasts continue to be filled with images of helplessness and hopelessness, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, or in Israel and the Gaza Strip, or Northern Illinois University.

I am sure, too, that we could all add our own scenes to these. How many of us know people who could cry out, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely”? How many of us could express the same veiled anger toward God that marked the speech of Mary and Martha when they said, “Lord, if only you had been here”? We don’t have to look very far to discover that feelings of abandonment, hopelessness, guilt, and despair are all around us – and in us. That’s why these stories speak to us. They’re not just “once upon a time,” they’re “once upon a now.”

That’s why we tell these stories again and again, because they’re not just about Ezekiel and Israel, or Martha, Mary, Lazarus, and Jesus, they’re about us. And right in the middle of each of these stories there stands the point of it all – God is there for us, God is here *for us*. Ezekiel is told to prophesy, “Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath

to enter you and you shall live . . . I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people . . . I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.” God breathes life back into hopeless, helpless situations. As the Spirit of God brooded over the chaos that was there before creation, so God’s Spirit seeks to recreate and restore the life and the goodness intended for humanity from before the beginning of time. God breathes and life is restored. Dry bones can live again!

Do you believe this? Martha gets asked that same question and she answers it the way so many of us would. She answers as if from a catechism or from a textbook. I remember firing off a catechism question to my father, “Why did God make you?” And how he replied, machine-like, “God made me to know, love, and serve Him in this life and to be happy with him in the next.” Remarkable what twelve years of Benedictine nuns and rulers will do to you! Martha’s answer is like that, it’s to the point, it’s rote, “I know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day.” She doesn’t realize that resurrection isn’t only about the end of life. Resurrection confronts death in the midst of life – it’s about the herenow, every bit as much as it is about the hereafter. We don’t learn about resurrection from doctrine, but from life itself.

When Jesus declares, “I am the resurrection and the life,” he’s telling us that he’s come to confront not only the physical death that awaits all of us – and which Lazarus had to go through all over again – but also all the little deaths that we die every day. In calling Lazarus up from the grave, Jesus is calling each of us up from the graves that we construct for ourselves. Those graves are dug from self-centeredness, greed, bigotry, prejudice, narrow-mindedness, guilt, lack of self-esteem and the list could go on and on.

Far too often, we place ourselves in these graves of our own making and bind ourselves tight with the grave-clothes and then wonder why we feel so dead inside. Then, like Lazarus, we need someone to come along and take the risk of rolling away the stone at the door of the tomb. Remember that when Jesus commanded, “Take away the stone,” Martha replied, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days”? There has to be someone who’s willing to risk even the stench of our tombs to bring us into life again.

Roberta Porter addresses this in a lovely little poem called ‘Resurrection.’ It takes the form of a prayer:

God,
Sometimes
We’re as tightly bound
As Lazarus
In a tomb:
Unseeing
Unfeeling
Unmoving.
Then,
In our bondage
You send
Another
To help free us;
A friend
Who believes
And rolls the stone away.
Unbound,
Enabled to emerge

From the caves of our making,
Our eyes are opened
To see your loving face.
We are released –
Resurrection!

I believe that the church is where we'll find "another friend who believes." Martin Luther thought that Christians became "little Christs" for each other. He focused on one's willingness to die for one's neighbor. For me, being a "little Christ" is about our willingness to *live* for one's neighbor; living for others and helping others to live is where we take the risk. And it is here in the community of faith, here in the gathered covenant community of the church that one can feel safe enough to be called forth from the tomb – stench and all. Why? Because those who call us out bear the same marks and themselves know what it's like to be called out of their tombs to live. The gathered community of Christ-followers is, then, a community of resurrection and a place where life happens in abundant freedom and abundant love.

For us to come forth and live and to become free, the kind of freedom that comes with the presence of the Spirit of the Lord, involves taking the risk of loving as God loves and working for change in the same way that God does, from the heart. That's very difficult for us and I'm convinced that is why we've taken the example of Jesus and the good news he preached and routinely reduced it to a set of moral instructions or rules. I so like what the French Biblical scholar of the last century Alfred Loisy said, "Jesus came preaching the kingdom and what came instead was the church." I'm sure if he'd lived later he would have added, "What a let-down." When we reduce everything to institutions or rules it minimizes the risk and gives us some controls or limits. When we take it and reduce it even further to assenting to a list or outline of things I "have" to believe. If all I have to do is assent to the 'Four Spiritual Laws,' then it's cool, it's checked off the list, but it doesn't make me free, it doesn't call me to come out and live, it just brings another kind of bondage to a different set of rules or expectations.

Let me give you an example of what I mean using a film that came out the year before "A Beautiful Mind." That film is called "Chocolat." Many of you, I am sure, have seen it. The story is set in a rural French village back in 1959. The people are staunch Roman Catholics because the local nobleman, who is also the mayor, is a staunch, rule-following Roman Catholic. Life in the village is ordered, the great motto is "tranquillité" (tranquility), life is rigorous and each person knows his or her place, and everybody knows everybody else's business. There is no risk and there is no freedom and as a result there is "tranquillité," but is there really?

Then one day the north wind blows in a young woman and her daughter. This strange woman proceeds to open a chocolate shop. It seems innocent enough, but she does it right at the beginning of Lent! Oh! Temptation! Degradation! Lent is to be observed as a time of strict self-denial and the mayor will make sure that it's so, even for the parish priest (whose sermons he reviews and often rewrites)! Not to mention that this woman is, well, different and that she and her daughter befriend the misfits and the outcasts of the village and she doesn't even go to church. How horrid! How improper! Good, moral, upstanding Christians can't stand for such things – can they?

I won't give away the whole of the story; some of you know it already. Suffice it to say that, finally, the wonder and the glory of Christian freedom breaks through this unlikely agent of change and, of all days, on Easter Sunday, and people's face change; it as though they have heard the word and come forth to live. Even the mayor comes out of his self-imposed

misery and learns to live again. There are smiles on faces, there is laughter, and people begin to feel as though they are no longer bound to dreary lists of rules and regulations, or other people's expectations. Easter does what it is meant to do – they are transformed. They come out and live.

In his book *The Unexpected Universe* Loren Eiseley offers a somewhat different perspective on resurrection. He describes walking along a beachfront:

Littered with the debris of life . . . Along the strip of wet sand that marks the ebbing and flowing of the tide, death walks hugely and in many forms. In the end the sea rejects its offspring. They cannot fight their way home through the surf which casts them repeatedly back upon the shore. The tiny breathing spores of starfish are stuffed with sand. The rising sun shrinks the . . . bodies of the unprotected. The sea beach and its endless war are soundless. Nothing screams but the gulls . . .

Later, he comes across someone looking down over a starfish.

"It's still alive," I said. "Yes," said the stranger and with a quick yet gentle movement he picked up the star and spun it . . . far out into the sea . . . "It may live," he said, "If the offshore pull is strong enough . . . The stars throw well. One can help them."

Eiseley then tells of how these two strangers walk along the beachfront, picking up the half-dead starfish, throwing them back into the sea in the hope that they might live again. Later, as he thought about the scene, he wrote these lines: "Somewhere . . . there is a hurler of stars, and he walks, because he chooses, always in desolation but not in defeat."

So, can these bones live? Can someone rise from the grave? Yes, and it happens every day. The "hurler of stars" walks among us and seeks to restore us to the fullness and the wonder of life. Even though the world can seem a very unsettled and desolate place, it is never without hope. In Christ, God has embraced humanity fully – even unto death – so that our lives can now be marked with a life that transcends and transforms death. God enters into our desolation, and where we had known defeat, God brings victory. We can rise from the tombs of our own making because the "hurler" stands outside them and calls to us: "Come out. Come out.... and live!"