

## “Death and Resurrection”

In today's readings, of which I've chosen two, we get to see different themes on a similar topic - death and resurrection.

For many of us in North America it may seem that cremation has only gained in popularity since the 1960's when, in fact, there are mentions of cremation in our sacred stories. Cremation has been around in some form since 1000 BCE, meaning Jesus would have known about it, yet it was not the preferred form of physical body disposal.

Burial for that matter, did not resemble what our modern day burial looks like, a machine dug hole in the ground into which there is often a concrete liner in place before the casket is lowered through an automated pulley system. Insider story – families are generally not encouraged to remain as the casket is lowered because it is rarely as smooth as it seems in the movies. I'll leave that one there.

It's a shame we only get four verses of the Hebrew scripture reading about the valley of dry bones. It really does paint a fantastical picture of Ezekiel's story. There was an area which was filled with dry human bones in various states of array. This afternoon I encourage you to read the full story of the valley of dry bones. It is only 14 verses long and tells a story such as you'd expect to see in a science fiction or action film in which rows and rows of human bones mysteriously and suddenly begin to form a human skeleton, which are then covered with sinew and muscle and then skin begins to form.

Ezekiel was ordered to prophesy that the earthlings would once again live, and in deed they did breathe and move about. The end of the story goes like this:

Then he said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.' (Ezekiel 37:11-14, NRSV)

This section was used for many years to encourage people to practice burial with their loved ones with the promise of resurrection in the next life.

I have always had a problem with this belief. And it's a very personal reason. My father was an amputee. In 1963 he was hit by an automobile while riding his motorcycle to work. The car struck him and the impact flung him into the air. He hit his helmet clad head on a bridge guard rail before hitting the ground and the motorcycle landed on his right foot.

The head injuries were considered the most pressing and once they were tended to, gangrene had affected his foot so his leg was amputated below the knee.

If we are to believe in a physical resurrection after death, then we would need the bones to be complete, correct? What does that mean for the millions of amputees around the world? Your body will still be missing a limb for eternity? Somehow that doesn't sound right to me.

In Jesus' day, the families were aware of the reading from Ezekiel and every family had a sarcophagus or "bone box" which would hold the bones of their family member for the day of resurrection. The sarcophagus would be a little larger than the tallest family member's femur (the longest bone in the body).

Burial in Jesus' day was very different than what it is today. Keep in mind the climate in which Jesus lived. Dry sand. If you've ever tried to dig a hole at a sandy beach, you know it doesn't work well. And so, in those days, tombs or graves were hewn from rock and the prepared body was washed, anointed with oils and spices to cover the stench of rot, then wrapped in bands of cloth, perhaps rolled in a shroud, then placed in the tomb until such a time as the bones were all that remained. At that time, the bones would be removed, cleaned and placed in the sarcophagus where the rest of the family bones would be kept until the day of resurrection.

That is part of the reason why there was so much upset when it appeared Jesus' body was missing. If he was not properly prepared, his bones would not be properly cleanable and then his bones would not be placed in the family sarcophagus for the day of resurrection.

I would challenge that what happened to the bones in Ezekiel's story was not resurrection so much as it was reanimation.

And not onto the gospel for today. It is a heartbreaking tale for many reasons. Keep in mind, Jesus knew Lazarus, Martha and Mary for a long time. They were his "ride or die", if you will. Now, Jesus receives word that his friend Lazarus is very ill but he does not travel to him immediately. Jesus has been out and about for a while now, preaching, teaching, healing the sick and talking about the next life.

Jesus knows he has something to prove with Lazarus and he cannot simply heal him. He must do something even greater than healing. But first Lazarus has to die.

I want to point something out in this next section of the reading. Thomas, whom we come to know as Doubting Thomas is shown in this scene. Jesus has been teaching his disciples, of whom Thomas was one, that there would be great trials. The word on the street was that the temple authorities were looking for Jesus and should he ever be seen in Judea, he would be, at the very least, stoned to death.

And yet, this is where Lazarus and his sister's lived. In Bethany which is part of Judea. So after two days of waiting, Jesus tells the disciples they need to go to Judea to see Lazarus. He tells them that Lazarus is not merely ill, he has died, so they must go with haste to see him. The disciples are afraid as they know the authorities mean to harm Jesus and his followers. Thomas says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (John 11.16, NRSV)

The other disciples are wavering about what to do, yet Thomas is ready to be with Jesus and be led to his death. Thomas, another ride or die for Jesus.

And so, the disparate group of followers go to Judea and Jesus goes to the house where Lazarus, Martha and Mary live. Martha is waiting for Jesus' arrival, Mary has stayed back in the house. Each sister, in turn, says to Jesus "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." Can you imagine the emotion of their voices and the dagger to Jesus' heart?

Lazarus was his friend and Jesus had to wait until he was dead. Nobody, yet nobody could understand what Jesus was about to do. In fact, we don't know that Jesus knew it would work. There is no precedent of Jesus attempting to raise someone from the dead. We know he healed the woman with the hemorrhages, the man born blind from birth and the centurion's daughter, but they were all still alive when Jesus arrived.

When Mary sees Jesus she comes outside the house to see him. The Judeans come with her to see what Jesus is going to do. They are also there to comfort Mary, whom they thought may be going to the tomb to weep. Jesus is overcome with emotion and he, too, weeps for his dead friend. The shortest sentence in the bible, Jesus wept.

Jesus tells Mary to take him to the tomb and she's concerned that there will be an overpowering smell of decay as Lazarus has been in the tomb, dead, for four days. There would be no doubt in anyone's mind that Lazarus was dead. Jesus raises his head up and prays aloud to God, not because he needed to pray to God, but to ensure those around him heard what he had to say - specifically the temple authorities.

He then commands, in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out".

Keep in mind, Lazarus has been dead for four days. He has been ritually prepared for burial, his body bound in strips of cloth to hold in the oils and spices. He's covered in a shroud and left in a sealed tomb. Jesus orders the stone to be rolled away and then calls for his friend.

We are told that Lazarus came out of the tomb, his hands and feet bound, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Many people may think he would exit the tomb, much like an old school horror film mummy with his hounds out before him. I posit that he, having his feet and hands bound, would have not walked so much as hopped.

Could it be that Lazarus was the first one to do the bunny hop?

In all seriousness, Jesus does command the crowd to unbind him and let him go. I would think that once the shock of his resurrection wears off, Lazarus would be grateful and somewhat hungry. But was Lazarus really resurrected? We are told, later in the gospel, that Lazarus dies again. Does this mean that Lazarus, like those in the valley of dry bones, was reanimated?

Now, the subject of resurrection itself could be the subject of a sermon series. I'm not going to do that. Resurrection is defined as a rising of the dead. Another definition adds that the rising of the dead is at the day of judgment. And still another definition adds that the body may or may not be changed.

It's complicated.

In both stories, the valley of dry bones and the resurrection of Lazarus, we have descriptions of a physical resurrection. By the first definition both of these stories were examples of resurrection. By the second definition, only the first story was an example of the resurrection. And the third definition may clarify or hinder the actual definition.

As a twenty-first century follower of Jesus, I do not believe in a physical resurrection following bodily death. I believe that resurrection is when we enter the next life – the place we go after our earthly life has concluded. We don't need physical bodies for the next place because it is more a state of mind than a physical location.

Please keep in mind that this is not something for which I have any tangible proof, rather it is a theory I have been researching most of my adult life.

It is most definitely coloured through my father being an amputee. And seeing how some aging bodies break down. And how I'm now at that point in my life where I need sound effects to get up from a seated position. If there is a physical resurrection of the body, I don't want this one – I'd like a newer, less worn out model.

And that is why my belief is in a spiritual, rather than physical resurrection. And by the time I get to figure that out, I won't have a way to let all y'all know. I hope and pray I am correct. Oh, a small favour...if any of you get there before me, can you try and send me a message about what it's like? Just so I know?

Let the Church say, Amen.

The Reverend Canon Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent  
Elk Valley Ecumenical Shared Ministry  
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Sermon for Lent V – 26 March 2023  
Ezekiel 37.1-4, John 11.1-45