

Rise Up—From Dry Bones to New Hope
The Reverend Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
Fifth Sunday in Lent, RCL Lectionary Year A
March 9, 2008

I don't know about you, but I sure wouldn't have wanted to be Ezekiel. He had more odd visions given to him by God than you could shake a stick at: Ezekiel's wheel, visions of cherubim and all sorts of odd creatures, God's glory departing the temple, the rebuilding of a new temple complete with detailed measurements—even dry bones. Let's face it, Old Testament prophets had a tough time of it—disbelieving people, authorities who sought your life, rejection by many. Fantastic, intense visions were only part of the package—and actually, probably one of the better parts. As a prophet during the Jewish exile in Babylon, Ezekiel prophesies about God's severe judgment on the sins of Israel and surrounding nations, speaking of a time of darkness and despair. Doesn't sound like a whole lot of good news to me. But as time goes on, these themes of despair change to hope, speaking of Israel's restoration and new life with God.

The vision of dry bones speaks to that restoration and new life. Placed in a valley of dried out and lifeless bones, Ezekiel is told to prophesy to these bones, that the Lord commands them to reconnect, to restore themselves, to put on sinews and muscle and flesh and skin—and so they do. But for all their outward appearance, they still do not live—for that they need the breath, the life-force that comes from God. They need the four winds, the spirit or 'ruach' of God. And so Ezekiel calls upon the winds as God has commanded him, and the house of Israel lives once more, and is restored. Through the power and love of God, even those whose spirits and hopes are as dry as dead bones can be restored to new hope, new life. For God is life, and there is nothing—or no one—that is beyond God's reach.

This is also the message of today's gospel story. Lazarus, Jesus' friend, has fallen ill, and Lazarus' sisters, Martha and Mary, send this news to Jesus. Jesus treats the news almost casually at first and delays his journey to Bethany to see Lazarus and his sisters. In all honesty, Lazarus

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may have been dead by the time the messenger found Jesus; for most travel was on foot and what would take us but a few minutes by car would take the better part of a day's journey back then. Somehow, on some level, Jesus was aware of this, for when he sets out for Bethany two days later, he first metaphorically, and then plainly, states that Lazarus is dead. But of this, he says, he is glad, for it has become an opportunity for his disciples 'to believe'.

The concept of 'believing' is essential in John's gospel—for John's community, it is not just 'intellectual assent' but rather it is something one gives with one's entire life to. It is based on an openness of the heart to the truth, to remaining faithful to one's experience no matter how life changing it may be. It is 'believing' that leads Jesus' followers to see him and understand who he really is—the Son of God, Jesus as the great "I AM". It is 'believing' that leads to a commitment to Christ, with every fiber of one's being. It is 'believing' that allows for one to see the glory of God—as shown through Lazarus.

When Jesus and the disciples arrive at Bethany, he was greeted by Martha, who professes her belief in Jesus—in him as healer, as the Messiah, the Son of God. And though she says she believes—and means it—she does not yet fully understand Jesus' meaning of being the resurrection and the life. Sure, she knew Jesus has raised the dead to life before—the son of the widow of Nain, the 12-year-old daughter of Jairus—but Lazarus has been dead for four days. This fact, seemingly small to us, is significant to the Jewish community of Martha and Mary and Lazarus. For it was a commonly held belief that the deceased's spirit remained nearby for up to three days after death—but by the fourth day, the spirit would have accepted the death as final and left. For Martha, for Mary, and for their community, Lazarus was beyond hope, beyond life. Like Ezekiel's dry bones, there appears that there is no way back.

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Mary, when informed of Jesus' arrival, also goes to greet him. She too, states her belief had Jesus been present, Lazarus would not have died. Her sorrow, her acceptance of the finality of the way things are—that certain things are beyond hope and that this is their lot in life—combined with the collective community sorrow, moves Jesus deeply. The translation that we read says that he was 'greatly disturbed in spirit'—but that fails to do the original Greek justice. Jesus was disturbed not by grief—but by anger. Not your ordinary, run of the mill anger at a traffic tie up or the boss (or your children) giving you a hard time—but the kind of anger that is born deep inside—the anger that cries out 'it doesn't have to be this way!'—the anger that moves one to action, to push against seemingly impossible odds, to change the 'way things are'.

And so Jesus weeps—for all of us. Yes, there is sorrow about what Lazarus and his family has endured, but these tears are not just for that. These are tears shed for all of humankind—for our failure to believe that things can be different, that our God is a God of life and love and mercy—and most of all, hope. In Jesus, God's emotions lay bare to the world—and God aches for us.

For every time we shrug our shoulders and accept injustice or abuse, Jesus weeps. When we stand small and feeling helpless in the face of corrupt or incompetent leadership, Jesus weeps. When we watch the TV news and see the faces of those torn apart by violence, poverty, famine, or war—and then just walk away shaking our heads, Jesus weeps. Whenever we give up hope, fall into despair, or decide that there's nothing that can be done—Jesus weeps.

But Jesus' tears do not stop him from acting. He asks to be taken to Lazarus' tomb, and once there, he moves quickly to show forth the glory of God—that life is always stronger than death, that with God, there is always hope. Even Martha's reminder that it has been FOUR days

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does not dissuade him from having the stone removed. Only then does he openly address the Father, and only for the crowd's sake. As he and the Father are one, there is no need of pleading or begging or bargaining—for Jesus does nothing that is not the will of the One who sent him. Jesus' command of "Lazarus, come out!" is not a gentle asking but rather a rebuke of death's hold on Lazarus, and of despair's hold on us.

And so Lazarus comes forth, restored to life, restored to his family and his community. It is only fitting that Jesus tells the crowd to unbind Lazarus, to let him go. For death no longer binds him, hopelessness no longer shackles him. For that is what the life and love of God do—they set us free; free to hope, free to change 'the way things are', free to start over. We may feel that our dreams lay dead and buried, that we have dug ourselves a hole so deep we cannot see out, that the world is too far gone for us to do anything about it. But God knows better, God hopes better—for God always has a dream for us, a ladder to reach to the bottom of the deepest hole, and that even the most lifeless and dry bones can breathe again. Never are we beyond the reach of the life and love of God—never.

As members of the Body of Christ, we are called to remember and share this truth, and no matter how dry you are feeling, God still can call to you. For in the words of that old spiritual:

*Ezekiel taught the Zion the powers of God,
And the bones begin to rise.
We're going to walk around with-a dry bones.
Why don't you rise and hear the word of the Lord?*

Rise up, people of God, and believe.

Amen.