

“Your Brother Will Rise Again”

By Dr. Dave Neale

In the Text

This Fifth Sunday of Lent we have two similar lectionary stories of the Bible. They are the Valley of Dry Bones of Ezekiel 37 and the Raising of Lazarus in John 11.

When I was in my doctoral program at the University of Sheffield, Christine and I needed to take in a lodger to make ends meet. And so we had a fellow post-grad named Mark came to live with us. He was an interesting guy, to say the least, and the entire department was confused and mildly amused because Mark came determined to do a doctoral dissertation on the Book of Ezekiel.

No one really does that, because the Book of Ezekiel is basically unintelligible to the modern reader – I’m sure it wasn’t to the original audience, but to us most of the meaning is lost. But here we are, so fools rush in! So, again, here we go!

Three years ago this same Ezekiel text was up. Remember “crazy hope” and “reverse zombie apocalypse?” Check out that message on our website (vicnazarene.ca and go to “see more sermons”, March 29, 2020; all of our sermons for the past three ½ years are there).

As I rewatched it I realized it was the second or third Sunday since the covid shut-down. I remember us saying at the staff meetings that I thought we would be shut down for a month and then back at it. I am clearly no prophet!

So we revisit the text because *we* have changed and the *world* has changed and the Word of God is new every morning. So, hopefully, our rereading of this passage and a brief comparison to the raising of Lazarus in John 11 will produce new insights for life.

In Jewish antiquity, and even now in some orthodox circles, I’m sure, Ezekiel was a forbidden book to any but the sages. The book is this ethereal place between heaven and earth; but it is also a book so subject to being misinterpreted, that only the sages had access – and of course my intrepid fellow post-grad, Mark.¹

Ezekiel writes after the destruction of Solomon’s temple in 590 BCE, and the people have been taken into “exile” in Babylon by the Persians, to languish for 70 years. The promised land is no more.²

By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. (Psalm 137:1)

The basic meaning of Ezekiel 37 is pretty clear.³ This colorful scene of a valley of bones being reconstituted into people is an analogy for Israel’s current situation: Israel in exile is a like the bones of the dead spread in a high mountain valley.⁴

In Persia the burial practice of the Zoroastrians is to lay people out on a high mountain and let the birds pick their bones clean. Hopelessly dead.

In Ezekiel's vision of hope the bones then rattle and clack together, sinew upon sinew, ***breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.*** (Ezekiel 37:7-10) Israel returns home, is re-established as a nation and a temple rebuilt in 520 BCE. Israel is reborn.

The NT text for the week which was read, is *another* story about the undead, the raising of Lazarus. The parallels with Ezekiel 37 are interesting.

- Both stories are about, well, corpses;
- Both stories are based on occupying forces in Israel. The Persians in 600 BCE and the Romans in the day of Jesus;
- Both stories are told in the context of the destruction of the temple; the Persians destroyed Solomon's first temple and then the Romans would soon destroy the second temple. (And if you aren't up on your first and second temple history then I suggest you come to church more often!). This is the black background on which the light plays.
- In each story the dead come to life.

When Jesus arrived in Bethany, four days after Lazarus died, Martha, Lazarus' sister, said that if Jesus had been there this wouldn't have happened. Jesus said to Martha ***"Your brother will rise again."***⁵

'That's crazy,' thinks Martha. So, in an attempt to lessen an awkward moment, she says ***I know that he will rise again in the resurrection of the dead.*** (John 11:22).

Sidebar: The resurrection of the dead is, in fact, a teaching of Christian theology.

- Jesus himself said... ***the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice, and will come out*** (John 5:28-29).
- In his famously obscure and tortuous explanation on the end of history in I Corinthians 15, Paul said, ***For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed... But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through out Lord Jesus Christ*** (1 Cor 15:50-57). The resurrection of the dead is a sure Christian doctrine. It is, he says, a "mystery."⁶
- The Creed says "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." "Jesus will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."

And whether we die before history ends, as in the normal course of life, or are alive when history ends, ***...in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.*** (1 Cor 15:51-57).

'This is different,' Jesus says 'I'm talking about something especially crazy.'

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-25).⁷

We readers of the Greek NT stop short when we see the personal pronoun “I” (εγω, egō). Verbs in Greek contain the person and number of the verb, as well as its tense, voice and mood are contained in the morphology of its ending – the personal pronoun is often unnecessary. Εμυ means “I am” (1st sing, present active indicative). Languages which are structured this way are said to be highly inflected (Latin, Hebrew and Greek).

When the personal pronoun “I” *does* appear it can be very meaningful. In response to Martha’s predictable comment about the end of time Jesus responds, No Martha, you don’t understand... ***I am*** the resurrection. He is not talking about something out there in the future.

I am life. Jesus names himself, even styling his statement after the style of the Hebrew name for God, Yahweh (I am).⁸

You get the same construction when Jesus says ***I am the Bread of Life...I am the Gate of the Sheep... I am the Way.***

Jesus isn’t talking about an event to come. This statement isn’t a promise of personal salvation (why do we always make everything about ourselves?)

It is life changing perspective about this moment - ***now***. Eugene Peterson captures the meaning of the Greek perfectly in *The Message: You don’t have to wait for the End. I am, right now, resurrection and life.*

I am life present tense!

Or as our text this week from Romans puts it with absolute clarity, ***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 the Spirit that dwells in you.*** (Romans 8:11)

You can keep your pie-in-the-sky religion. It is the promise of resurrection life in the present tense. This is what we must have for life.

The raising of Lazarus has a hollow meaning if you take it to be about the resuscitation of one dead body. Lazarus went about his life and died again.

Jesus does this miracle as a demonstration of his nature as God. The raising of Lazarus is a ***sign*** of the victory of God over the last great enemy, death. ***The last enemy to be destroyed is death*** (1 Cor 15:26).

Jesus raises the dead three times during his ministry, that we know about. Not because one person’s life must be restored and another’s not.

The widow’s son in the village of Nain (Luke 7:15), Jairus’ daughter (Mark 5:42), and Lazarus (John 11:44). The culmination is his own resurrection of the dead, which is an “act of salvation for humanity and the cosmos... It shows forth gloriously Jesus’ exaltation as Lord and Judge and promises resurrection and eternal life to all the faithful.”⁹ All of this leads us to the cross.

[Musicians - Jordan and Kerena]

I have two perhaps unsurprising and, by now, familiar takeaways from the passages today.

First, the journey of faith is not about waiting to escape the “now” for heaven; wishing away today.

This life is now. Resurrection is now. You are already resurrected! This allows us to live a life of rejoicing, no matter our trials.

Second, we ought not to think of the difference between us and the dead as a yawning gulf. Salvation is not a distant reality! It isn't somewhere else. It isn't as Stevie Wonder says in his song about heaven: 'a zillion light years away'

The dry bones of Ezekiel and Lazarus raised, teach us that the Resurrection is among us now and always.

Thanks be to God. Amen

¹ But...the important thing to understand about apocalyptic is that its purpose was not *predictive*, to foretell the future, but *palliative*, to assure those living in a time of political oppression or social crisis that the ultimate ruler was still God, and that, in spite of the present calamitous situation, divine rule would be re-established in time. God's people must know that he is sovereign. Not nation states... God. That is the essence of apocalyptic.

² This happens about 6 centuries before Jesus. They are there in Babylon for 70 years. They return under Zerubbabel about 520 and rebuild the temple. See the books of Ezra and Nehemiah for the record of those events in the Bible.

³ Ezekiel himself: ***Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel"*** (Ezekiel 37:11).

⁴ The Zoroastrians exposed their dead on high valleys in the belief that the corruption of the flesh was to be avoided, so the bones be would be picked clean by vultures, something that only took a few hours after exposure.

⁵ He raised three people from the dead in the NT. The widow's son in the village of Nain (Luke 7:15), Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:42), and Lazarus (John 11:44).

⁶ Paul's views on what happens to the body are not clear really. Generally, it seems he views death as an immediate union with God, and certainly at the end of the age all will be drawn into the Presence. Phil 1:21-25; 2 Cor 4:16-5:10 and his main exposition on this topic is 1 Cor 15. Paul does not teach that our physical bodies will be raised at the end of history but that ***What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable... there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body... flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God*** (1 Cor 15: 42-49).

⁷ In the rest of the story, which we didn't read this morning, Jesus cries out, "Lazarus, come out." ***The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."*** (John 11:44)

⁸ Here are a couple of examples of this construction in John. ***I am the bread of life*** (6:35). ***I am the light of the world*** (John 8:12). ***I am the gate for the sheep*** (John 10:9). ***I am the way, the truth and the life*** (John 14:6). ***I am the true vine*** (John 15:1).

⁹ *The Anchor Bible Dictionary of the Bible*, "Resurrection (Early Judaism and Christianity)", vol 5, pp 688ff.