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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/6/2014, The Fifth Sunday in Lent
Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-45

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴³ ... [Jesus] cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out."

⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." (John 11:43-44, RSV)

In today's Bible readings, death gets its comeuppance. I am deeply satisfied to think of that. In the stories of the valley of dry bones and the raising up of Lazarus, the writing is on the wall for death. Oh, death will stagger onwards. Ere long it will even lay hands upon Jesus himself and will do its worst to him on the cross. But today's stories of the dry bones and Lazarus, and then the story of Easter, tell the truth of the matter. Death staggers onwards even onto our day, but death is a conquered enemy unworthy of our loyalty, unworthy of ruining our lives.

That's one of the things I hate about death: its power to distort human life even for the living. I hate the power of death to tempt us into fear and the anxious impulse to grab everything in sight while we can.

Let me give you an example from the movies, from the 1987 romantic comedy *Moonstruck*, starring Cher and Nicolas Cage as a young couple and Vincent Gardenia and Olympia Dukakis as an older couple.

It's the older ones I want to talk about now: Rose and Cosmo. Rose knows that Cosmo is having an affair. Of course she is hurt by this. But also she is perplexed by it. She doesn't understand why her husband would be unfaithful to her. So she asks Johnny about it. Johnny is played by Nicolas Cage. Johnny's theory is that men chase women because God took a rib from the man to make a woman, and that men feel a hole in themselves ever since that only a woman can fill.

But this isn't what Rose is after. She doesn't wonder why men chase women so much as why they are not content with one woman:

Rose: [frustrated] But why would a man need more than one woman?

Johnny: I don't know. Maybe because he fears death.

[Rose looks up, eyes wide, suspicions confirmed]

Rose: That's it! That's the reason!

Johnny: I don't know...

Rose: No! That's it! Thank you! Thank you for answering my question!

Later, Rose puts this insight to work:

Rose: I just want you to know [Cosmo], no matter what you do, you're gonna die, just like everybody else.

Cosmo: Thank you, Rose.

And Rose, God bless her, confronts Cosmo about his unfaithfulness:

Rose: Have I been a good wife?

Cosmo: Yeah.

Rose: I want you to stop seeing her.

[Cosmo rises, slams the table once, and sits down again]

Cosmo: Okay.

Rose: [pauses] And go to confession.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, the apostle speaks of a kind of captivity cast upon humanity by the fear of death. He says that Jesus came to deliver us from this captivity. The great saying goes this way:

¹⁴Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage. (Hebrews 2:14-15, RSV)

Christians are to be the “salt of the earth” also in this sense: that spread amongst humanity there are to be some who are so undismayed by death that they do not permit themselves to wreck the world for the sake of present pleasures. When the devil comes along whispering his beguiling suggestion, “This is your one chance in life for joy. You had best go for it!” Christians are the ones who can answer back, “No, this is not my one chance in life for joy. There still remains to me the joy of a good conscience in this life and joys unspeakable and full of glory in eternity.”

Rose: [frustrated] But why would a man need more than one woman?

Johnny: I don't know. Maybe because he fears death.

But a Christian need not fear death so much as to leap into adultery or fall into other sins against our neighbor.

So, let's take a look at this morning's stories about the beginning of the end of death.

EZEKIEL 37

If you come to our Easter Vigil this year, you will sit in our darkened church, with just a few candles lit, and will hear many great passages read aloud from the Old Testament. This is one of them – this morning’s reading from Ezekiel 37 about the valley of dry bones.

The starting point of this story goes back to the Garden of Eden and the warning the Lord gave to Adam and Eve:

¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” (Genesis 2:16-17, RSV)

Now, by the time we reach Ezekiel 37, it appears that this warning has come true. The Temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed, the city itself has been leveled, and many of the Jewish people, including the prophet Ezekiel, have been carried off into Babylonian captivity. By all natural reckoning, Israel is dead and done for. She is so dead that her bones are dry and scattered.

And it is important to note that this is a calamity not just for Israel, but for the whole world. For Israel’s great mission in life is to be a blessing for all the nations. That was the promise the Lord had made to Abraham from the very start:

²And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing : ³And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.
(Genesis 12:2-3, KJV)

So, if Israel lies dead, if Israel is kaput, then there is no hope for humanity. In the end, death would get us all! We might as well “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.”

But what is impossible for us is not impossible for God, and so those scattered bones drift together and line up properly. “Dem bones... Toe bone connected to foot bone, foot bone connected to the heel bone,” and so on.

And then he who breathed life into us in the beginning does so again, and the valley of dry bones stands up, a living nation before God.

This is step one in death’s comeuppance. Now, let’s look at step two: the raising of Lazarus.

LAZARUS

“Jesus wept,” the text says. St. John Chrysostom suggests that the weeping of Jesus at the death of his friend Lazarus reveals the human nature of Jesus and his ability to grieve as we do. Chrysostom points out that in St. John’s Gospel, there is

no story of the Garden of Gethsemane, there is no nighttime of prayer in which Jesus is in agony of soul. In John's Gospel, Jesus is calm and majestic throughout his arrest, interrogation, and even his crucifixion and death. The great heading over the whole Passion story for Saint John is the saying of Jesus about this mastery of these things:

¹⁸No man taketh it [my life] from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again... (John 10:18, KJV)

But here, as he contemplates the death of Lazarus, Jesus weeps. We should imagine him weeping still in sympathy with us. If we stand at the grave and our heart is heavy, let us imagine the very heart of Jesus being heavy too.

Our text also says that Jesus was "troubled" at the death of Lazarus. He wept, yes, in sympathy for his old friend and for those who grieved for him. But also he was ...

...deeply moved in spirit and troubled." (John 11:33 RSV)

Why troubled? Judging by the remainder of his life and his Holy Week victory over death, I think we can say that Jesus is troubled by the arrogance of death, by its cruel hand laid upon everyone in sight, by its pretence that it rules the creatures God had intended for life from the beginning – even abundant life. Jesus is troubled because Mary and Martha and the Jews with them and all of our sad human race must weep before the graves of our loved ones, when God did not make us for such misery.

And so Jesus goes with Mary and Martha to the tomb of Lazarus and summons that man out!

⁴³...Jesus] cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out."

⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

And so it is that he who once commanded wind and waves to be still, such that they leapt to obedience, bringing peace to a raging sea, commanded death to let go! of one of its innumerable victims, and death complied. No option, really, before him who is the Prince of Peace, the Resurrection, and the Life. Oh! I bet the devil shuddered to hear those words: "Unbind him, and let him go." Those words were a foretaste of the collapse of his kingdom.

So, Jesus marches to the tomb of Lazarus, thereby initiating the final spasm of opposition to him. It is not long after the raising up of Lazarus that Caiaphas speaks the fatal words:

⁴⁹But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all; ⁵⁰you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.” (John 11:49-50, RSV)

The raising up of Lazarus does this thing: it starts the way of the Cross for Jesus. But Jesus does not back down. Death has exercised its tyranny over humanity for too long. And for too long have human beings been those...

who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage.
(Hebrews 2:15, RSV)

I close with one more line from *Moonstruck*. It is a word of encouragement from Rose to Cosmo. The exchange goes this way. We begin with Cosmo:

Cosmo Castorini: A man understands one day that his life is built on nothing, and that’s a bad, crazy day.

Rose: Your life is not built on nothing! Ti amo.

“Ti amo.” I love you. Your life is not built on nothing. So says Jesus as he raises Lazarus back to life and heads off to the Cross for himself. Ti amo! Humanity. I love you!

And to this loving One be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.