

Ezekiel 37:1-14

John 11:1-45

To Life!

One of the biggest stories in Canada in the last few years has been the discovery of graves of indigenous children around residential school sites. For years residential school survivors have spoken about the graves, knew they were there, but until that day back in May 2021 in Kamloops they had only their stories, no proof. Thanks to ground penetrating equipment, there is now the evidence to validate the stories and memoirs of those who have spoken out for decades about the death, the loss, and the tragedy.

When those first graves were identified and communities across Canada, people across Canada, tried to make sense or come to grips with the revelation, I too struggled to know how, as a minister of the Presbyterian Church, I was called to respond in this time of national mourning, knowing that the Presbyterian Church had participated in the residential school system. As I pondered and prayed, I had an opportunity to reach out to an indigenous colleague who graciously took time to share with me and talk with me, even as she was mourning with many of her own nation.

It was she who pointed me to the passage from Ezekiel 37, saying, "read the verses of that chapter and in it you will find new meaning about God and death." The following verses were particularly poignant, "When I dig up graves and bring you out as my people, you'll realize that I am God. I'll breathe my life into you and you'll live. Then I'll lead you straight back to your land and you'll realize that I am God."

The Bible, whether Old Testament or New, does not shy away from conversations about death. Our belief as Christians is based in the death and resurrection of Jesus, where death does not have the final word, but rather life. Just like the dead and dried up bones in the valley where Ezekiel was commanded to prophesy and life was breathed into the bones, so the story of Jesus is about death and life. The promise of Easter is life, life abundant where we belong to Jesus, to the living God, and from that find meaning and purpose for living in the present, while abiding in the future promise of eternal life.

Again, this week, as last week, the scripture passage we are taking into account is long, but it is a story or at least part of the story, and so to glean wisdom and knowledge from it we need to hear the fullness of the story. This experience, this sign of resurrection, where Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb, was the last straw for those in authority. It was after this sign of Lazarus raised that they deemed Jesus just too dangerous, too much of a threat to their power and oversight of the people.

One of the statements that comes just after our reading speaks to this as “the high priests and Pharisees called a meeting of the Jewish ruling body. ‘What do we do now?’ they asked. ‘This man keeps on doing things, creating God-signs. If we let him go on, pretty soon everyone will be believing in him and the Romans will come and remove what little power and privilege we still have.’” (v47-48)

So when we think of Easter we are aware that God had a plan through Jesus to redeem us, bring us new life through Jesus’ death. But Jesus was also seen as trouble. A threat to be removed by any means necessary. One thing that has always been sure is that people are people. Everyone of us struggles with sin. When an entire group gets on the band wagon of power, seeing themselves as in the right, not open to be curious about another and what might be going on there, regardless of what position you take...when dialogue is not a possibility, learning not even considered, then to put it mildly, “shit happens”. And it did with Jesus and the plot to kill him.

But before all this concern and reaction there was the background for the reaction, the story of Lazarus, the miracle of life from death. Let’s go back and review. After Jesus heard that his dear friend Lazarus was sick and was summoned, Jesus took his sweet time to arrive in the town of Bethany. We know by the story that Lazarus died, was buried and had been in the tomb four days by the time Jesus shows up on the scene. My understanding is that in the Jewish tradition the belief is that it takes three to seven days for the soul to leave the body. In this instance it may have been that Jesus waited so long to come so that in the sign of resurrection that Jesus would enact with the words, “Lazarus, come out!” there would be no question in the minds of those present that Lazarus was fully dead, no spirit lingering about to bring him back to life. It was Jesus that brought life.

Still, only two verses are given to the actual raising of Lazarus. The majority of the story focuses on the grief being experienced. The words spoken by the two sisters, Martha and Mary, express much of what most of us go through when facing deep grief. “If only.” If only I had noticed the signs. If only he hadn’t gone out and shoveled the snow. If only she wouldn’t have gone out when the weather was so bad. If only we could have gotten better care or treatment. If only I had not lost my job. If only we hadn’t moved. If only they had acted on the pain. If only....name your if only. From Martha and moments later from Mary we hear the words, “If you’d been here, [Jesus] my brother wouldn’t have died.”

I have been wondering about Jesus initial response to those laments. We heard, “When Jesus saw [Mary] sobbing and the Jews with her sobbing, a deep anger welled up within him.” And then as I read and studied more, I came to understand that the anger was not directed at the sisters, not directed to the mourners with her, but rather his anger was at death itself. You see the one thing Jesus could not and cannot take away from our lives is death. Jesus had even to face his own death. For all that Jesus could do to heal, teach, show compassion and love, he could not remove the sting of death. In this moment with anger and tears mingling together, Jesus wept.

If we speculate, knowing the love that Jesus had for Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus. Knowing the length to which he went and he knew he was going to go to in order for us to know life through his own death. Knowing that death was going to be a part of the human story until heaven and earth become one. Jesus showed anger and wept.

People often ask “Why God?” when someone dies. The why is that death is part of being human, and to be human is to die. Often, like with Lazarus, it is illness, or it may be calamity that takes those we love the most away from us. Ripping them from us and creating a chasm that is uncrossable. We live in an imperfect world, full of beauty in creation and loving relationships, but also full of fear, harm, and death. And death was the one thing that Jesus could not remove from our living and it made him angry and he grieved it. Jesus wept.

Yet, in Christ, death does not have the last word. Even Martha sensed that there was something more. She said it in her words, that if Jesus had only been there, her brother would not have died. And even now, though her brother is dead Martha states “I know that whatever you ask God he will give you.” And when Jesus said “Your brother will be raised up.” She replied, “I know that he will be raised up in the resurrection at the end of time.”

She had no idea how immediate the life giver would bring life. Death had its moment, but it was not the final word. Jesus said, “I am, right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believe in me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all.”

Every funeral service I lead has these words in it. Right near the beginning I proclaim this promise of Jesus. I don’t know who hears it, really, but it is there. Jesus is the resurrection and life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all!

We believe in the living God. Life is God’s desire for us. Life today, life tomorrow, life eternal. When we talk about sharing the gospel, this is what we are talking about, LIFE! A life that is filled with love, hope, joy, promise, peace, grace, community, and restored relationships. This is the promise for you, for me, and for everyone regardless of culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social or economic status, or whatever other defining boundary you want to add. Life is promised to all.

Our call as the church is to take the bones of those who are dying to poverty, addictions, grief, sorrow, and loss in this life and breath life into them through our love and compassion, our working for justice and equity. It is why we are looking to see as a community of faith, as the people of God, how God is asking us to show love in the world in the year 2023, not as we have done for the last couple hundred years and at St. Andrew’s for the last 113 years, but for our own time.

Life is going to look different than we are used to, whether it is the church or our individual lives. Life is not static, it changes, it grows. We change and grow, and all things experience death, people, creation, and that which we have created by our human hands. But the last word is not death, not for us as individuals who are still inhaling...breathing life giving air, or life-giving Spirit. God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit in community and communion with one another are Resurrection and Life. Believe in Jesus and live!