

April 2, 2017
The Fifth Sunday in Lent

"DEAD OR ALIVE?"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Ezekiel 37:1-14 ~ John 11:1-45

We're making a visit to a cemetery today. Cemeteries always move me, and one of the most profound experiences I have ever had was my visit to a cemetery in Boston ... by the old Park Street Church, on the Freedom Trail ... not far from the Boston Commons. In this one cemetery were the graves of Samuel Adams, Paul Revere, John Hancock, and Benjamin Franklin's parents.

I was also amazed to find graves from a hundred years earlier than the revolutionary heroes who were buried there. Time collapsed. It was as if these heroes had just passed yesterday. I knew them. They were alive to me. I was living in the world they had built ... enjoying the freedom they had purchased. Not really that long ago. Cemeteries are good places to reflect on history and the meaning of life, but of course, they are painful places, too. Not the kind of place you might ordinarily hang around.

But that's where John takes us ... following Jesus to the grave of his friend Lazarus. You might not want to go there, especially if you have been to a cemetery lately with someone you love ... but John wants to show us something about Jesus ... something Jesus shows us about God ... that we need to know. So here we are at the cemetery ... with Mary and Martha and a crowd of their friends ... weeping and wailing because good Lazarus is dead. Here we are by his grave ... in the style of the day ... a cave with a big rock rolled across the front. But where is his friend ... his best friend ... Jesus? He doesn't even come to the funeral.

From the story it would seem that Jesus isn't particularly anxious to visit the cemetery. He doesn't exactly rush down to Bethany to visit his sick friend. In fact, Jesus arrives four days after Lazarus is buried. Why doesn't he come quickly? Why doesn't he run to help his friend? Well, perhaps it's because Jesus has always resisted doing miracles on demand. He operates out of his own center ... takes directions from the One who sent him ... not from the people to whom he has been sent. Maybe we need to remember that when we pray ... that we are here to serve God and not the other way around. It's never as if we have the power to make demands of God ... or even the right.

Or does Jesus delay on purpose so that Lazarus will die and the miracle will be greater? But what kind of friend would do that? Could it also be possible that Jesus hesitates because he knows the danger waiting for him down here in the suburbs of Jerusalem ... in the shadow of the Temple ... near the skull shaped hill? Jesus will pay a price for coming to help this friend. The disciples remind him of that. They certainly don't want to come down here, not right now. When Jesus finally decides to visit Lazarus, Thomas says to the others in a voice loud enough for Jesus to hear, *"Well, we might as well go die with him."*

We hear that Jesus has been sighted, and we run with Martha to meet him. She gets right in his face. You gotta love Martha. She's never one to sit by quietly keeping her opinions to herself. She scolds him: "*Jesus, where have you been? Why didn't you answer our prayer? If you had been here, he wouldn't have died.*" Martha asks this for herself and for her sister Mary ... not only because they loved their brother but because they are afraid. They have depended on Lazarus for their own living, as women with no male to protect them in those days faced a great challenge. But she is also asking for us ... whose prayers are often not answered quickly and not according to our plans. We tell Jesus what we want him to do for us, but he takes his own sweet time about it ... if he answers at all. We may complain, but our faith says that God knows what is best for us and when. And, as I said, we can't make God do a blessed thing.

Jesus tells her, "*Your brother will rise again, Martha.*" "*Yeah, yeah, I know. On the last day,*" she replies with a kind of orthodox sarcasm. Martha thinks he's tossing her a platitude ... as people will do when they don't know what else to say ... and they need to get past the moment because they're feeling bad. Everybody who's been through grief has had this happen to them. People say something trite or traditional that leaves you feeling cold ... with no room for your sorrow ... as if it were unacceptable. They say, "Well, at least he had a long life," or "God never gives you more than you can handle" to which my reply is always, "then I wish God didn't hold me in such high esteem." We mean well when we offer these words, and probably we have all said something like this at one time or another. But Jesus doesn't mean to deny Martha's grief with some bromide. And he isn't talking about resurrection on the last day. He means something about life here and now. "*I am the resurrection and the life,*" he tells Martha. "*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?*" he asks her. "*Do you believe this?*" he asks us.

Martha gets Mary, and Mary follows her sister's lead: "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" They bring him (bring us) to the cemetery ... to the tomb, sealed with its stone. It's quite a scene. The crowd follows and starts wailing loudly. Mary and Martha are holding each other, crying. And look! Jesus weeps, too. Can you see the tears?

Why does Jesus weep? Is he hurt by their lack of faith? I don't think that's it. Does he not weep at the pain Mary and Martha feel, at the ordeal his friend Lazarus has endured? The crowd is moved by his tears. "*See how much he loved him,*" they murmur. Perhaps he weeps at the specter of human sorrow, because in Lazarus' death, they also have died, and he has died, at least a little. The power of death squeezes vitality from them all. Might he not also weep at the reality of death ... at the thought of his own approaching death and burial? The Bible does not meet death with denial. We are mortal stuff. Death is real, and we will not avoid it. We are all on our way to the cemetery. Jesus' tears at Lazarus' tomb honor our tears at the tombs of the people we love. So Jesus weeps with us. Jesus weeps for us. Jesus weeps for you and for me. But he does not stop at the tears.

"Take away the stone!" Jesus orders us. "*Lord, you don't want to do that,*" Martha whispers. "*It's been too long.*" But Jesus insists. He prays as some of the men roll back the stone. And then he calls his friend by name: "*Lazarus, come out!*" All is silent ... then we hear a slight rustling ... is it the wind in the trees? No! It's coming from the tomb! "*Lazarus, come out!*" Jesus shouts.

And by God Lazarus comes out! Lazarus lives! "*Unbind him and let him go,*" Jesus says. But who can move? We are too astonished! When was the last time you were astonished by something God did? At last we gain our senses ... we run to Lazarus and unwind the grave cloths and there he is, laughing and winking and alive and with us.

What is John trying to tell us as we stand in this cemetery today with Jesus? What is Jesus wanting to show us about God? That the dead in Christ are not dead, but they live with him in the resurrection? That it may be four days or forty days or forty billion days, but he will hear our prayer at the time he chooses and bring our dearly departed back to us? That one day when we die, Jesus will call us by name, and tell us to come out, too? Yes, I think there is a message here about trusting God with what happens beyond death. And we see that, even before the cross, Jesus is all about resurrection and life.

But isn't there something here, too, about life *here and now*? Our neighbors in Mexico celebrate *El Dia del Muerte*, the Day of the Dead. They dress in skeleton suits and have a fiesta mocking the boundary between life and death ... emphasizing the lively and continuing presence of those who have gone before them. We ourselves speak of the cloud of witnesses and the communion of the saints. This room is almost thick with their presence. As I have said before, since they are with God and we are with God, we are all alive together in the presence of God. I am not saying that there is no death ... that there is no grief ... but that death is not the black hole of despair we are tempted to make it. Death is a limit. It puts everything in perspective. It tells you, as we remembered just a few weeks ago on Ash Wednesday, that "you are dust and to dust you shall return," so don't get too big for your britches. But here we are today, just a few weeks later, with Jesus saying to his friends, "You are *life*, and to *life* you shall return." So do not despair. Death is not the end. The end is life. The issue that remains is whether or not we choose to be dead or alive now.

We worry, as well we might, about life after death. But I think John wants us to hear Jesus ... on the eve of his cross and resurrection ... at this cemetery ... saying something about life *before* death. Will we live in mortal fear ... fighting age with every modern product advertised on television ... or will we love each stage and occasion of our lives? Will we live in the shrine of the past ... get stuck in grieving over what might have been ... or embrace life as it comes and move on in faith looking for what the Resurrection and the Life might do? Will we invest in the things that come to nothing and in the things that bring death to others ... or will we be a vital people with eternal values on our minds? I think, in Christ, we have a real choice. I think it's easy for us to give up and just go through our days until they are over ... or, we can engage wholly, take risks, feel passion, be involved ... make a difference while we can. Jesus says he is the Resurrection and the Life. He is with us, not only at the cemetery, but here in church, in our work, in our homes, wherever we go, always bringing life. Do you believe this? Do you believe this? As Fred Craddock observes, "*In the light of the Gospel, the one unforgivable sin is to be dead.*"

And I wonder, does the church still believe in a God who has the power to bring life out of death ... a God who can cure our diseases or change our hearts ... a God who can free the addict and lift up the fallen? Ezekiel looks across a valley of dry bones and the Lord asks him, "Mortal, can these bones live?" How would we answer that today? Can our church live? We are aging and

sometimes we get weary with well-doing. Are we keeping the grounds of a cemetery or building the strong foundation of God's house where future generations may thrive? People who visit want to know, will they find life here? Will they find a people who will be the church for them? Will this be a place where hearts yearn to embody the living Christ here in Eagle River, WI? I believe the answer is yes. But we have to choose it and God has charged us to the task.

Jesus told Martha, *"If you believe, you will see the glory of God."* I suspect Lazarus' grave is not the only tomb in this cemetery Christ has come to open today. I wonder if there isn't somebody who has had a dream die, and you wrapped it and buried it and sealed it in place. Or maybe there is a relationship with someone who was once a close friend but something got between you, and so the friendship is dead and buried. Maybe even a member of your own family. Or maybe what is dead is your heart because somebody hurt you ... or your compassion because helping seems so hopeless when the needs are so great ... or your passion for justice because the social forces against it are just too strong. Is something important entombed in you ... dead and buried and dried up into nothing because of something terrible that happened in your past ... and what remains is bitterness, decay, desiccation, despair, cynicism, apathy, a dull enduring sadness? Standing in this cemetery with Jesus today, John is telling you, these bones can live and what was buried can rise again. Do you believe this? Do you believe this?

May we pray?

Lord, we believe; help our unbelief. Call us out of death today. Call us out of despair. Call us out by name and give life to our dried bones. Astonish us with your power to give life, then send us into the cemetery of souls with the dangerous good news that life is rich and enduring, that life is now and forever in Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.