

From Earth & Dark to Life

A group of boys in the neighborhood found a dead robin and decided it should have a proper burial. They found a box to put it in, dug a hole, then placed it in. But when it came time to say something, they were at a loss. Then they looked at Tommy, whose father was a minister. "You say something Tommy."

*Like a lot of pastor's kids his learning went in one ear and out the other...but something must have crept in by osmosis. So Tommy took a breath, held out his hands over the little grave and said:
"In the name of the Father and of the Son – and in the Hole He Goes."*

During the times we face death my first instinct is to remember the promises of God. I'm not sure why but I had never thought of the very distinct message we find in Ezekiel today. "God is the one who opens graves and has us rise from them, who puts the Spirit within us and settles us upon our own land. This is the promise of the Lord from the very beginning, and God's promises are true. God is life itself, and life consists in having the Spirit of God within us. We know we are in the presence of God when death is shattered and nothing seals up life and the Spirit: nothing!" (McKenna, p 146)

Lent is nothing if not a time to reflect on life, even in the midst of death. After this brutal winter we cannot help but yearn for the promise of life. We have been praying the psalms during this time and Psalm 130 is the prayer for those of us in need – facing death and desperation – AND it is a prayer of confidence in the mercy of God: "With the Lord there is mercy, and fullness of redemption." It is a sure reminder that with God there is no sin that cannot be forgiven. (McKenna)

Both these readings put us in the mindset to then hear how Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. We are invited to suspend all sense of logic – for it is God at work here and no matter how we try to reason it out we know the power of God is beyond reason. This is the Creator we are talking about, the One who is above all things, and in all things and through all things. We are, because God is. So keep in mind what Paul tells the church in his letter to the Romans, that the same Spirit, which raised Jesus from the dead, dwells within us . . . that the resurrection is already in our bodies, singing in our spirits, words and lives. It's a deep reminder that we are to "live in that same Spirit, and not as though we are already in our tombs." (McKenna, p 147)

The long story of Lazarus sets up for us the events of Holy Week. For the gospel writer, everything up to this point and everything that follows leads to and stems from what Jesus says: "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, though he should die, will come to life and whoever is alive and believes in me will never die." "There is nothing that is not subject to the power of God in Jesus – not sin, violence, injustice, disbelief, evil, not death itself . . . What happened to Lazarus happens to us first in baptism . . . and then happens in moments throughout all our lives . . ." (McKenna, p 147)

So what do we make of this strange story – one where news comes to Jesus that his good friend is dying, and he waits two more days to make a visit? He tells his disciples that what happens to Lazarus will be to serve God and give glory to God. This is counterintuitive to us...wouldn't we want to be there, especially for such close friends as Lazarus and his sisters? - - - Consider, though, what Jesus will soon be facing. What appear to be nonchalant or callous words will echo over the coming darkness of Good Friday.

Jesus and disciples travel to Bethany at great risk...it seems the element of risk is always present for those who choose to follow Him. They arrive to find Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days...and Jesus promises the sisters that their "brother will rise again." Jesus speaks the words that announce truly who he is – "I am the

resurrection and the life...” and asks Martha if she believes. Once again she shows her deep faith and goes and gets her sister. They all go to the tomb and that is where we get a glimpse of Jesus in the face of death: surrounded by the mourning crowd he is greatly disturbed – and he, too, breaks down and weeps.

Jesus tells them then to roll away the stone – he faces the stench of death and commands Lazarus to “rise up”. Even in death Lazarus hears the Word of God and obeys. But he is bound in grave wrappings and must be freed – and “it is the company of believers that frees him, facing [Lazarus] in the direct of a new life.” (McKenna p. 149)

Jesus’ actions are rooted in his single-hearted faith in his Father and what he was in the world for – sent to bring life out of death, resurrection out of despair, loss, and sin.” But Jesus’ work, as we have seen, does not bring out the same response in all people. The power of life that Jesus gives not only evokes humility and awe in us who would dare believe – it evokes rage, hatred and as one writer put it, “a burning desire to kill hope in the flesh and words of believers.” (McKenna, p. 151)

Jesus wept that day. And even today there is still much to weep over. We, like Jesus, are sent to stand before the tombs and call one another forth with the word of God – as Jesus called Lazarus. We, his followers are to do likewise: Tear the bindings off one another. Set one another free. Speak the word of God and encourage each other to live the resurrection life now.

We can do this because we know God shows up in all kinds of places – a death valley where scattered bones are brought to life; a stinking tomb from which life is freed; and in our own lives where we have felt “very dry”. It is the promise of God that brings the breath of new life – and God’s promises are true.

Mckenna, Megan. *Lent: reflections and stories on the daily readings*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, NY. 1996